The AIR PIRATE

RANGER GULL

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BY

RANGER GULL

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Dedication

TO PERCY BURTON, Esq.

In memory of a certain celebrated walk
from Great Holland to Frinton-on-Sea,
and the salmon we met at the end of it.
With all good wishes from the Author.

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THE AIR PIRATE

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CHAPTER I

THE COMMISSIONER OF AIR POLICE FOR GREAT BRITAIN RIDES TO PLYMOUTH IN GOOD COMPANY

NEARLY two years ago a leading London daily newspaper said: "The Government have assured us that all danger from present and future air piracies is now over, and that the recent events which so startled and horrified both this country and the United States of America can never recur. For our own part we accept that assurance, and we do not think that the Commissioner of Air Police for the British Government will be caught napping again.

"In saying this we do not in the least mean to imply that Sir John Custance could either have foreseen or prevented the astounding mid-Atlantic tragedies. Sir John, though barely thirty years of age, is an official in every way worthy of his high position, an organizer of exceptional ability and a pilot of practical experience. Press and public are perfectly well aware that it is owing to his personal exertions that our magnifi-

cent Transatlantic air-liners are no longer stricken down by the Night Terror of the immediate past. And in saying this much, we have both a suggestion and a request to make.

"The inner history of the piracies is only fully known to one man. It is a story, we understand, that puts the imagination of the boldest writer of fiction to shame. Such parts of it as have been made public hint at a story of absorbing interest behind. The bad old days of censorship and secrecy have vanished with the occasions that made them necessary. We suggest that a full and detailed 'story' of the first—and we trust the last—Air Pirate should be written, and given to the world. And we call upon that most popular public man, Sir John Custance, to do this for us. He alone knows everything."

At the time that it appeared I read the above to Charles Thumbwood, my little valet, as I finished breakfast, in my Half Moon Street chambers.

"Not *quite* correct, Charles. You know almost as much about it as I do. To say nothing of a certain friend . . ."

"I wouldn't say that, Sir John," said Charles, brushing my light overcoat. "Though I rode part of the course alongside of you; to say nothing of Mr. Danjuro." Thumbwood was a jockey before I took him into my service. "Are you going to write it all down, Sir John?"

"That depends on several things, and on one person especially. I must think it all over."

Think it over I did as I drove to my offices in Whitehall—the Scotland Yard of the Air—and I discussed it afterwards with a certain lady. . . .

Which is how the following narrative came to be written, though I did not complete it until the best part of two years had elapsed.

II

I never did any flying during the Great War. I was too young, being only fifteen and at Eton when Peace was signed. But from the very earliest days that I can remember aviation fascinated me as nothing else could. My father, the first baronet, left me a moderate fortune. He died when I was eighteen, and instead of going to Oxford, I entered as a cadet in the R.F.C. It is not necessary to detail how, when I had earned my wings, I joined the civil side of flying and became a pilot-commander in the Transatlantic Service. I had a good deal of influence behind me, and, to cut a long story short, at twenty-eight I was Assistant, and at thirty Chief Commissioner of the British Air Police. I was answerable to Government alone, and, within its limits, my powers were absolute.

It was on a morning in late June, the 25th to be exact, when the wheels began to move. I date the

start of everything from that morning. About one o'clock on the preceding night Thumbwood had waked me from refreshing sleep. A wireless message, in code, had been received at Whitehall. It was addressed to me personally, and was from the Controller of the White Star Air Line at Plymouth. My people at Whitehall, on night duty, thought it of sufficient importance to send on even at this hour.

As soon as I was thoroughly awake, and had done cursing Thumbwood, I read the message. It only said that a matter of the gravest importance required my personal presence at Plymouth, and would I come down at once.

Now considerable experience of the fussy great men who controlled the air-liner companies, which linked up England with all parts of the world, had made me somewhat skeptical of these urgent demands for my presence. More than once I had to explain that I was not at the beck and call of any commercial magnate, and if I had made myself disliked in certain quarters I had, at least, made my office respected.

Accordingly I scribbled instructions to the chief inspector on duty that he should send a wireless to Plymouth requesting further details. Then I went to sleep again.

As a matter of fact, I *was* going to Plymouth the next morning in any case, though on private business. Sir Joshua Johnson, Controller of the White Star

Line, did not, of course, know that. His midnight message was a coincidence.

I could have flown down from Whitehall in my fast police yacht in an hour, but, as it happened, I was going to train from Paddington. Sir Joshua could wait until I turned up some time after lunch.

How well I remember the morning of my departure from town. The long departure platform at Paddington was crowded with well-dressed, happy-looking people, as I stood by the door of my reserved carriage in the Riviera Express—that superb train, with its curved roof, which runs to Plymouth without a stop.

Thumbwood, invaluable little man, filled the carriage with flowers, great bunches of white lilac and June roses, and the station-master, who came up for a chat, looked curiously at the bower my valet had made. The Chief Commissioner of Air Police was not wont to travel like that!

For my part, I was wildly exhilarated, and at the same time, as nervous as a boy making his first flight. To-day might prove one of the happiest or quite the most miserable of my life. I was going to put it to the test. Confound it, why didn't Connie come?

On this morning Miss Constance Shepherd, the young light-comedy actress, adored of London, and to me the rose of all the roses, was traveling down to Plymouth to catch the air-liner starting from that port

to New York at eight-thirty this evening. And she had promised to travel with me!

Would she have done so, I kept on asking myself, if she didn't know quite well what I meant to say to her? Or was it just friendliness? I knew she liked me.

. . . Why didn't she come? Here it was, only eight minutes before the train started. As I searched the platform, with an eye that strove to appear calm and unconcerned, I saw faces that I knew—faces of theatrical celebrities, two or three of the prettiest girls in England, a handsome, hook-nosed young man, who was, perhaps, the best known theatrical manager in London, two eminent comedians carrying bouquets. And the Press photographers were beginning to arrange their cameras. . . .

I had completely forgotten what a tremendous celebrity dear little Connie was. I might have known they'd have given her a send-off on her way to the States. All the same, it annoyed me, as it seemed to be annoying a tall, hatchet-faced man in Donegal tweeds, who scowled at the little crowd. Was he a friend, too, I wondered?

She came at last, very late of course, and after a brief smile at me, underwent the public ceremonies of the occasion, while I—I own it—retired into the carriage for a minute or two. But I saw the cameras click, and the girls embrace, and the crowd of sightseers trying to push into the charmed circle, and then

Connie was in the corridor, leaning out of the window, waving and smiling as the train began to move to an accompaniment of loud cheers.

"My dear Connie, royalty isn't in it!" I said, as she stepped laughingly into the carriage, and I pushed the sliding door home.

"Oh, they're dears!" she said, "and they do really mean well, despite the fact that we shall all be in the picture papers to-morrow morning, and that's good for business."

"I thought you were never coming."

"It is an impression I convey," she answered; "but I'm very careful, really. My maid was here with the luggage half an hour ago. What lovely flowers you have got for me, John!"

She lay back in her seat as the train gathered speed and Ealing flashed by with a roar, and I feasted my eyes on the fairest picture in the world.

She wore a simple traveling coat and skirt of white piqué, and the white lilac was all about her, framing her face as she held up a branch to inhale its fragrance. All England knew that face in the days when little Connie sang and danced herself into the heart of the public, but none knew it as well as I.

How can I describe that marvelous hair of dark chestnut, those deep amethyst eyes, and the perfect bow of lips which were truer to the exact color of coral than any I have ever seen? It only makes a

catalogue after all. It's the expression—the soul, if you like—that makes the true face; and here was one so frank and kind and sweet that when one looked it seemed as if hands were placed beneath the heart, lifting it up!

On one other day only did I see her more lovely than she was now.

Well, it was too early to say what I wanted to say, and, besides, I was nervous as yet. We hadn't settled down. As I expected, her breakfast had consisted of tea and a macaroon, so I produced a basket—lunch was to come later—in which a silver box of caviare sandwiches was surrounded by crushed ice in a larger box of zinc. There was also iced hock and seltzer water. We both felt more at home in a few minutes.

We had lit our cigarettes, and I was thinking hard, when someone passing along the corridor looked in upon us for a moment. I had an impression of a brown face and a scowl. It was the man in tweeds that I had noticed at Paddington.

"That *beast!*" said Connie suddenly.

I turned and looked at her. She was frowning adorably, and I thought she looked rather pale.

"D'you know him, then?"

"I did, and I simply hate him."

"Who is he?"

"I expect you've heard his name, John. Most people

have in town. He is Henry Helzephron, a big man in your way once."

I *did* know the name as that of a pilot of extraordinary courage and ability during the Great War. He had gained the Victoria Cross when a lad of twenty, and his exploits during two wonderful years formed part of the history of aviation. He had not flown for years now, and divided his time between the more dissipated haunts of the West End and an estate he had somewhere in Devon or Cornwall, a "has-been" with a sinister reputation, a lounger of thirty-six.

"I know. 'Hawk Helzephron' he used to be called. Gone all to pieces, I understand. But how do *you* know him, dear?"

"He did me the honor to ask me to marry him about two months ago," she answered, "and since then he is always putting himself in my way. He does not speak, but he comes to the theater and glares. I am always meeting him, and I hate the sight of him. He makes me afraid. . . ."

Here was my chance and I took it like a shot. She should never be unprotected from Helzephrons and all the tribe who haunt the stage door any more!

A successful aviator takes instantaneous decisions. He must. If he hesitates he's lost.

What I said, as the Riviera Express hurled itself through the summer noon, is not part of this narrative. I daresay I was no more original than most men, but

the results were eminently satisfactory for, as we ran past the towers and winding river of Exeter, Connie and I were engaged.

I remember that I lugged the ring out of my waistcoat pocket—sapphires and diamonds, a top-shelf ring!—precisely as we glided through Exeter Station.

"O-oh!" said Connie, as the thing winked and shone in the sunlight; and then: "You *wretch!* I'll never forgive you—never!"

I wondered what was the matter. In fact, I asked her.

"You made so sure of me that you actually bought this beforehand!"

"It doesn't do to leave anything to chance," I said, and I made her put it on, and gave her several other things of no particular importance while she was doing it.

For the rest of the journey, past the red cliffs and blue seas of Teignmouth and Paignton, we had a long and happy talk, finding out—of course—all sorts of delightful things about each other which we had only suspected before.

Perhaps there is nothing fresher and more delightful in life than those first few hours of revelation, when a man and a girl who love each other have, at last, become engaged. It is like coming into harbor after an anxious voyage, and yet, all the time there is the

splendid knowledge that there are new and marvelous seas waiting to be explored, this time—together!

Connie was to act in New York for a month and in Boston for a fortnight. It was a "star" engagement, and six weeks would soon pass. Besides, now that Plymouth was barely thirty hours from New York, there was nothing to prevent me from popping over once or twice to see her. I was responsible to no one for my time, and half a dozen quite real matters in connection with my job would provide a valid excuse. After the six weeks were over, why, then, we would be married!

"There is absolutely no reason on earth why we should wait," I told her, in sublime ignorance of what the Fates had in store for both of us. "I'll have a special license ready, and the day you land again on this side you shall be Lady Custance, darling!"

So it was settled, lightly and happily enough, and when we left the train at Plymouth Station there was not a cloud in the sky or in our hearts.

I found that Mr. Thumbwood had been making excellent use of his time, even as his master had, for the little man was assisting a demure and well-looking maiden to collect luggage, who turned out to be Connie's maid, Wilson.

We left them to it and drove to the Royal Hotel, not before I had seen the train start again on its journey to Cornwall, with Mr. Helzephron—whom I had

quite forgotten—standing in the corridor and regarding us with a malignant scowl upon his hawk-like, dissipated countenance. But Mr. Helzephron, and all other men alive, were about six a penny to me just then.

Connie was to leave the sea-drome at eight-thirty in that fine flying-liner *Atlantis*. She was a Royal Mail ship, and about the fastest and finest flyer in the Transatlantic service, with a carrying capacity of three hundred and fifty passengers, and a thousand tons dead weight of cargo. Her crew numbered forty, and she was commanded by Captain Swainson, one of the most reliable pilot commanders in the air. He was a man I both knew and liked.

Connie wanted a rest and a sleep. "At least, I want to be alone to think it all over!" she said, so she went up to her room in the hotel at once. I arranged to call for her at five, when we would go for a stroll and afterwards have an early dinner. Then I washed my hands and strolled into the famous long bar of the hotel for a sandwich and a whisky and soda, before proceeding to the offices of the White Star Line on the Hoe.

As I munched my sandwich I wondered what the affair was that had made Sir Joshua Johnson send me a wireless message in the middle of the night—a time when obese old gentlemen should be fast asleep in bed. I had told my people at Whitehall to ask for further

particulars, but I had not the least intention of being bothered with them—or any police business whatever—until I had settled my own personal affairs with Connie. Accordingly, when I left my chambers in the morning to go to Paddington, I sent a message to Whitehall to say that I was proceeding to Plymouth during the day, and would wait till my arrival to hear what the business was. Muir Lockhart, my assistant, would perfectly understand, and was quite capable of dealing with anything that might come along.

The long bar was, as usual, full of naval officers, with a sprinkling of Air Merchant Service men in their uniform of gray, silver and light blue. I saw no one that I knew, until the swing-doors leading into the hotel were flung open, and a wiry little man in the black and silver uniform of my own corps came hurriedly in. His peaked cap, with the silver wings and sword badge, was pushed back on his head, and he was in a state of unenviable heat and perspiration. He was Pilot Superintendent Lashmar, chief of the Ocean Patrol stationed at Plymouth, with equal rank to a lieutenant-commander in the Navy, and one of my most trusted officers in the West.

He went up to the bar and ordered a "long glass of iced ginger-beer, with a dash of gin in it," and then I clapped him on the shoulder. He wheeled round in a second, and when he saw who it was his face changed from anxiety to relief.

"Thank Heaven you're come, sir," he said, as he saluted. "We've been signaling to Whitehall all the morning, and all we could get was that you were on your way. I've been backwards and forwards from the A.P. Headquarters to the White Star Office a dozen times."

"I came down by train, Mr. Lashmar," I said, realizing in an instant that there really *was* something important afoot, and that by bad luck I was behind time. Sir Joshua Johnson was all very well, but when my own people began to send out signals—that was quite another matter.

"We thought you'd fly down in the yacht, sir, and we've been sending wireless trying to pick you up."

"I couldn't. I have had some most important business to attend to. Anyhow, I'm here now. What's it all about?"

"You haven't heard *anything,* sir?" he asked in amazement.

Again I cursed my luck, but I wasn't going to give it away. "We'll go round to Sir Joshua Johnson at once," was all I said.

"That will be best, sir, and then every detail can be put before you in sequence. I have my report with me, written up to date. I think I've taken all possible measures up to the present, but, of course, we've been waiting for you. Sir Joshua, as you may imagine, is half out of his wits."

"He's not had very far to travel, then," I said to gain time. All this was so much Greek to me, and I had to walk warily.

In a minute more Lashmar and I were on the Hoe and approaching the stately offices of the Line, which stood in the very center of that famous promenade above the blue waters of the Sound.

CHAPTER II

FATE OF THE TRANSATLANTIC AIR-LINER "ALBATROS"

THERE were a good many people in both the ante-room and the secretaries' room as I was led to Sir Joshua. I was immediately aware of an unusual stir and excitement, and people nodded and whispered as I passed—"That's Sir John Custance, the Police Commissioner." "I expect there's some news," were two of the *sotto voce* remarks I heard.

Sir Joshua sat in his own magnificent apartment, with the great window looking out over Drake's Island and Mount Edgcombe to the horizon. A tray and a decanter showed that he had lunched there, and there was a good deal of cigar smoke in the air.

Sir Joshua was a tall and corpulent man of nearly seventy, with a red face with little purple veins in the cheeks, a thatch of snow-white hair and close whiskers. He had been an early pioneer of commercial flying, and had reaped his reward in the control of the finest air fleet in the world and the Lord knows how many millions of money. He was distinctly an able and upright man, and his only faults were a slight pom-

posity and a mistaken idea that the Commissioner of A.P. for Great Britain was a sort of unpaid official of The White Star Line! A good many of the great air-shipping magnates had tried to take that line in the past—and been snubbed for their pains!

Sir Joshua was not pompous this afternoon, and his face was twitching as he shook hands.

"Thank God you're come, Sir John," he said, "I am almost out of my mind with worry and anxiety. You will agree with me that this affair is as grave as it well can be?"

To that I was diplomatically silent. What I said was: "I have seen Superintendent Pilot Lashmar. What I want now, Sir Joshua, as a preliminary, is a brief and exact account from your own lips."

"Sit down," he said, pushing a padded chair towards me and handing a box of cigars. "You shall have it in a nutshell." He sat down opposite to me, pulled some papers towards him with a hand that shook a little, and began to read.

. . . "Our liner *Albatros,* carrying the mails, left New York yesterday morning about seven a.m., American time. She was consequently due here at Plymouth about six-thirty this afternoon—Greenwich. The weather conditions at the ten thousand feet mail-ship level were perfect. In addition to the mails there were about two hundred passengers, and she carried, though this was known only to a few officials, a parcel of par-

ticularly fine Brazilian diamonds, consigned from Tiffany's of New York to Aaron and Harris, the dealers in precious stones, of Hatton Garden. The jewels were in the ship's safe, in charge of the purser. Various ships—I have the full list—sighted the *Albatros* during the day and exchanged signals, while she duly reported herself by wireless as she passed each lightship, as soon as dusk fell. The lightships, as you know, are a hundred miles apart from the Fastnet to Long Island, and are connected by cable with our telegraph room here. The indicating dials register, degree by geographical degree, the exact position of any of our ships when in the air. This record is printed on a tape beneath each dial, and each record is examined every hour or two by a clerk."

Of course, I knew all this. The minutest detail of the system was familiar. I wished that Sir Joshua would "cut the cackle and come to the 'osses." No doubt my face showed something of what I felt, for Sir Joshua half apologized.

"You see, Sir John," he said, "I thought it best to prepare some sort of short and coherent statement for the Press. As yet they have got hold of nothing, but we can't possibly keep it much longer. Even you couldn't, with all your powers. And what I am reading is this statement. I particularly want you to hear it, as, of course, it rests with you if it shall be published in this form or not."

I bowed, and Sir Joshua continued:

"At ten o'clock last night the clerk on duty examined the tapes. When he came to the one recording the progress of the *Albatros,* he found that for two hours there was no record of her at all. The last record was that she had passed and signaled to Lightship A. 70 that all was well. A two hours' gap is so unusual, owing to the—er—perfection of our organization, that the clerk was alarmed, and reported the matter to a superior upstairs.

"A general call to all our ships in the air at that moment was at once sent out, and in a few minutes responses were received from several of them to the effect that the *Albatros* had not been sighted. Nor was there any answer from the ship herself. A signal to Lightship A. 71, the next guide-boat the *Albatros* should have passed, elicited the information that she had never done so. By eleven o'clock all these facts were known in this office. The night staff here became seriously alarmed. By a fortunate coincidence I was attending a performance at the Theatre Royal close by, with Lady Johnson and my daughters. This was known, and a messenger caught me at the close of the play, and I came round at once. I had not been in the offices for five minutes, when news of the most extraordinary and sensational character began to come in from our receiving station by the Citadel.

"Captain Pring, one of our most reliable pilot com-

manders, was in charge of the *Albatros*. The message was from him, and this is the gist of it. At sundown the *Albatros* was flying on the ten-thousand-foot level. The Lightship A. 70 was some twenty miles astern. No other airships were in sight, when the look-out man reported a boat coming up at great speed from the east. The *Albatros* was doing her steady ninety knots, but as the two ships approached, it was seen that the stranger, a much smaller boat, was flying at an almost incredible rate. Pring reports that she was doing a sixteen to eighteen second mile, but there is doubtless a mistake in the message.

"The boat showed no distinguishing lights, and failed to signal, as she flashed past the liner at the distance of half a mile. There were several curious features about her which attracted attention, though what these were we do not yet know. This strange ship turned and came up with the *Albatros,* actually flying round her in spirals with the greatest ease. Then, without the slightest warning, she opened fire on our vessel, and the first shell, obviously by design, blew away our wireless."

My heart simply bounded within me. This was news with a vengeance! I had to exercise all my self-control not to pour out a stream of frantic questions. It was beyond thinking! Such a thing had not happened since the League of Nations came into being. It might mean hideous war once more—anything!

Sir Joshua had paused to drink a glass of water. He understood the immense gravity of this news as well as I did, and his voice was unsteady as he went on in answer to my nod!

"The *Albatros* was helpless. Since the international agreement that only naval, military and police ships may fly armed, she had no possible means of defense. Flight, even, was impossible, and the loss of her wireless forbade her to summon help. Then the anonymous ship turned a machine gun on her rudder and shot it out of gear. There was nothing for it but to descend to the water and rest on her floats. Pring was forced to give the order, and she planed down. The other ship followed and took the water not two hundred yards away.

"She then signaled in Morse code, with a Klaxon horn, that she was sending men aboard the *Albatros,* and that if the captain or crew offered the slightest resistance she'd blow her to pieces. They launched a Berthon collapsible boat from a door in the stern fusilage. There were four men in her, all armed with large-caliber automatic pistols, and wearing pilot's hoods and masks with talc eye-pieces, so that it was impossible to identify them. Pring could do nothing at all. He had the passengers to consider. These ruffians cleared out the safe and the women's jewel-cases—they left the mails alone—and in ten minutes they were back again with the loot. The ship lifted

and went off in the dark at two hundred miles an hour, leaving the *Albatros* helpless upon the water.

"It was a business of several hours to rig up a makeshift rudder, but, fortunately, her searchlights were all right, and she kept on signaling with these until she was sighted by a big cargo steamer, a Baltimore to Cadiz boat, coming up from the south, the *Sant Iago.* She took off the passengers and is bringing them home; she's only a fifteen-knot boat, but I have already dispatched one of our smaller liners to pick her up and take the passengers aboard. They ought to be here some time to-morrow.

"The *Sant Iago* has wireless, and was able to communicate, not only with us, but also with the air-yacht *May Flower,* which she sighted on the four-thousand-foot level at dawn. The *May Flower* belongs to Mr. Van Adams, the Philadelphia millionaire, who is crossing to England with a party of friends. She came down to the water and took up Commander Pring and the second officer, and should be here by tea-time this afternoon. Then we shall know more of this unprecedented, this deplorable business."

"And the *Albatros,* Sir Joshua?"

"A small crew was left on her, and an emergency tender and workmen started at dawn. She ought to be flying again to-night."

I had all the available facts at last, and long before Sir Joshua had finished my mind was busy as a mill.

There was going to be the very biggest sort of commotion over this. England and America would be in a blaze of fury within twenty-four hours, and every flying man, from the skippers of the lordly London-Brindisi-Bombay boats, or the Transatlantic Line, to the sporting commercial traveler in a secondhand 50 h.p. trussed-girder blow-fly, would be wagging the admonishing finger at ME.

"Thank you, Sir Joshua. Most lucid, if I may say so. As a clear statement of fact, combined with a sense of vivid narrative, your account could hardly be improved on."

"You think, Sir John . . ."

"When the time comes to make a statement for the newspapers I would not alter a word."

Thus did the tongue of the flatterer evade a situation that might have been a trifle awkward for me. I rose at that. "I must leave you now, Sir Joshua," I said, "as I have a great deal to see to and must rejoin Mr. Lashmar. Steps have already been taken, and later on in the day I shall be able to tell you more. Meanwhile I shall see Captain Pring directly the *May Flower* arrives, and before anyone else. Our future action must depend a great deal on his statement."

This was said in my curtest official manner, and then I got out of the room as quickly as I possibly could. Lashmar was waiting, and I took him by the arm and hurried him out of the office.

"I've only just heard full details, Lashmar, and pretty bad they are. Now has anything been done—by us, I mean?"

"I had two of our patrol ships out at two-thirty this morning cruising over a wide area, sir. They are out still, and reporting every hour. No results, no strange airship seen anywhere. I've been out myself up and down the Irish coast and round the Scillies this morning, more for form's sake than anything else. And I've cabled the whole story, as far as we know it, to the States."

"Good! Any reply from them?"

"Their police ships are out from Cape Breton to the Bermudas, but they don't seem to have sighted anything out of the ordinary as yet."

"Of course, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack along that huge stretch, eight hundred miles if it's an inch. But, as far as I can see, it's up to them; not us."

"You think so, sir?"

"Why, yes. It's a case of sheer rank and daring piracy. It's been organized with great skill, and the pirates, whoever they are, have command of something quite out-size in the way of a ship. There isn't a works in England where such a boat could be built without our knowing about it before it was launched. And it's dead certain that there's nowhere in these little islands to hide her. Every single bit of spruce and

piano wire with a motor-bicycle engine that can fly ten yards has to be registered and licensed by me. No, this is an American stunt."

We had been crossing the Hoe as we talked, in the direction of the Citadel, and we now came to the long, low building of Dartmoor stone, which is the Plymouth Headquarters of the A.P. It is perched on the edge of the cliff, and within five yards of the spot where Sir Francis Drake is said to have finished his game of bowls when the Armada was coming up Channel.

We passed through the gates, where the police sentry presented arms, and began to walk up and down the terrace.

"Signal to Southampton," I ordered, "and get a couple of their fastest boats here at once. They may be useful in an emergency, and it will look as if we are doing something. Ready for action, of course, and with full service ammunition and bombs. Sir Joshua may have a fit if he likes, but there is nothing to be done until we know more—unless you can suggest anything?"

The little man shook his head. He was keen as a terrier, of course, and he had already acted with great promptitude and wisdom.

Just then an orderly came out on to the terrace and handed me a signal.

I read it out to Lashmar: "Air-yacht *May Flower* just passed St. Mary's doing ninety knots." It was

from our most westerly A.P. station on Tresco in the Scillies. Lashmar made a rough calculation: "Twenty-five miles west-sou'-west of Land's End, add another seventy—she'll be here just under the hour, sir."

"Then I tell you what, Mr. Lashmar, go and meet her and escort her home. Not a living soul must speak to Captain Pring before I do—not even Sir Joshua or any of the White Star people. Give that as my orders when you meet the yacht. But put it very politely to Mr. Van Adams—my compliments and that sort of thing. He's the sort of person who could buy the goodwill of the universe for ready money. Make your escort appear a compliment from the Government!"

Lashmar never wasted words. He understood exactly, saluted, and hurried to the electric railway, which ran down like a chute into the sea-drome far below. I lit a cigarette and watched, and it was a sight worth watching.

Beyond stretched the largest sea-drome in Great Britain, a harbor within a harbor, surrounded by massive concrete walls. In the roughest weather, when even within the distant breakwater the Sound is turbulent, the sea-drome is calm as a duck-pond. Now it was like a sheet of polished silver, and resting on their great floats at their moorings were three gigantic air-liners, with electric launches and motor-boats plying between them and the landing-stages.

Right in the center was the splendid *Atlantis*, grace-

ful as a swan, by which Connie was to leave for the States in a few hours. She was surrounded by a swarm of boats no bigger than water-beetles from where I stood.

A bell rang, there was a rumbling sound, and from a tunnel just beneath me the car, with Lashmar in it, shot down to the water like a stone running down a house roof. As the car dwindled to a punt, a match-box, and finally a postage stamp, I heard the creak and swish of the semaphore behind me on the roof of the station. On the far side of the sea-drome was our Patrol Ship No. 1, stream-line fusilage, with the familiar red, white and blue line, snow-white planes, guns fore and aft, and twin propellers of phosphor bronze winking white-hot in the afternoon sun.

The semaphore was sighted in five seconds. I got a pair of glasses, and saw that the engines were already "ticking over" as Lashmar jumped into a launch and went over the pool, with a cream-white wake behind him and two ostrich plumes of spray six feet high at the bows. He was on board in less time than it takes to write it. I heard the faint throbbing of the four high-compression engines change to the drone of a hornet. No. 1 Patrol slid over the water until her floats lifted—lifted until they barely touched the surface, and she was clear. One clean spiral over Pinklecombe way, and then, as she mounted, she turned and was off over Rams Head like an arrow from a

bow. Though I say it that shouldn't, my officers and men of the A.P. were just about as good as they're made!

There was a good three-quarters of an hour to spare, and the Royal Hotel was not four minutes away. After the recent excitements a cup of tea with Connie seemed just the thing. As I legged it over the Hoe, I realized that I might be very busy for some time, and, in consequence, late for dinner. I must tell my girl that something of great importance had happened, though, in any case, I was determined to see her off, come what might.

Then I remembered something. As Chief Commissioner I had absolute control over the air-ports of England in a time of crisis. In any case, it would be as well to close the sea-drome in preparation for the *May Flower's* arrival. I should then be certain that no one could possibly get at Captain Pring before I could. And if I chose to detain even the Royal Mail for half an hour later on in the evening—under the circumstances!—no one would say me nay.

There is a telephone box in the hall of the Royal Hotel. In thirty seconds my orders were given, and not a living soul would enter or leave Plymouth sea-drome without my permission. Then I strolled into the winter gardens, where I found Connie sitting at a little table among tubs of azaleas and listening to the strains of a ladies' orchestra.

"I've half an hour and ten minutes exactly, darling," I said, putting my watch on the table and helping her to early strawberries. "Tell me when the time's up, and then I must rush away for an hour before we dine."

Straightway I forgot all about the *Albatros,* Captain Pring, and the mysterious armed ship in mid-Atlantic.

Knowing what I know now, I wonder how I could have taken it so lightly, even then. But grave and serious as the affair was, amazing, too, in its boldness, an elaborate and unexpected masterpiece of crime, it seemed remote and very far away, like something one reads of in a foreign newspaper, never conceiving that it can have anything to do with one's own *personal* life.

If only I could have peeped but a little way into the future!

CHAPTER III

"COLD-BLOODED PIRACY IN THE HIGH AIR"

PILOT-COMMANDER PRING was a tall, lean, lantern-jawed officer, who, though of English nationality, had spent most of his life in America. His face was still pale and grim with passion and mortification as I closed the door of my private room at the A.P. Station on him, Mr. Van Adams, the multi-millionaire, and Mr. Rickaby, second officer of the *Albatros.*

"Now, gentlemen, sit down, please," I said. "And I will ask Captain Pring a few questions. Sir Joshua Johnson has given me the main facts, but I want details. I won't detain you long, but I felt I ought to see you before anyone else."

"Oh, quite!" said Mr. Van Adams, a fleshy man, with a watchful eye and a jaw like a pike.

"This is an extraordinary affair, Captain Pring," I went on. "But, thank goodness, you haven't lost your ship, or any lives. I know what you feel about the *Albatros.*"

"She is father, mother, brother, sister, hired girl

and dog under the wagon to me!" said Pring, and then he blazed up into fury. I disentangle the few words I can. The majority were too overdressed for respectable society.

". . . His Majesty's Mails! First time in history of flying, and it's happened to ME! Cold-blooded piracy in the High Air! They'd have blown us to pieces as soon as look at us! When I get hold of that slime lapping leper, the pirate skipper, I won't leave him hide or hair to cover the wart he calls his heart! . . ." and so on, for a good two minutes by the office chronometer.

I let him rip. It was the quickest way. It's dangerous to throttle down a man like Pring.

"The Captain is, naturally, furious," I said.

"Oh, quite!" answered Mr. Van Adams.

Then we got to business. "The strange airship, Captain Pring. Let's begin with that. She approached you flying *West,* I understand?"

"She did, Sir John. Does that put you wise to anything?"

"It would appear that she was coming from Europe. But that was probably a trick. She might have been waiting about for hours."

"Curious thing, then, that all the ships in the air during the last thirty hours that were within fifteen hundred miles of the American and Canadian coast never saw anything of her. The Air Police of the

U.S.A. have questioned every registered boat, Transatlantic and coastal trade, and not one of them sighted her. And, as you know, Sir John, from Cape Race to Charleston in summer weather the air's as thick with craft as gnats over a pond. Ain't that so, Mr. Van Adams, sir?"

"Quite, Captain Pring."

"I see your inference. Well, we'll leave that for a moment. I understand that there were some peculiar features about this ship. What were they?"

"She's the fastest thing in the air, bar none. That I can swear to. A pilot of my experience can't well be deceived, and if that ship—she's one of the very few I've seen with four propellers—can't do two hundred and forty miles an hour, *without a following wind, mind,* then I'm a paretic!"

I whistled. Such speeds had been dreamed of but never known. "Nearly three times hurricane velocity!" I said.

"She'd race the dawn, Sir John! and that's my honest belief. There's never been such a flying boat before. And she don't carry a crew of more than twelve or fifteen men, in my opinion. The rest's all engines and petrol. She ain't more than twice the size of one of your patrol ships, all over."

This was talking! Each moment the affair grew more tense and interesting.

"That narrows our field of search no end," I re-

marked. "A boat like that can't be built anywhere in the world without leaving traces."

"It colors the cat different, sure," said Captain Pring. "Now, here's another point. Gum! I'm going to startle you some more, Sir John, but, as God sees me, I'm speaking truth. Here's Mr. Rickaby here as'll swear to all I say. . . ."

He looked at the second officer, a good-looking, brown-faced lad. "It's all gospel, Sir John," he broke in.

"Of course," I said impatiently, "I know you couldn't be mistaken, Pring, and I won't insult you by thinking you'd pull a Chief Commissioner's leg over an affair of this importance. What's number two? Let's have it!"

"The man who runs her, or the man who built her, has solved another problem. He's produced silent engines at last! That ship's motors don't make more noise than a June bug! On a dark night she could pass within two hundred yards of you, and you'd never guess that she was near."

From that moment I saw the thing in its true proportions. From that moment the air became unsafe. A man-eating tiger let loose upon a quiet country-side was not a tithe as dangerous.

The three other men saw that I understood.

"The scoundrels who came aboard the *Albatros* and looted the ship. What of them?"

"They were masked so's their mothers wouldn't have known 'em. Armed to the teeth, too. We'd have downed them quick enough, even at the cost of a life or two, but there was the pirate with a four-inch gun trained on us. And she meant business. I did right, Sir John?"

The poor fellow's voice shook, and his face was corrugated with anxiety.

"I should have done exactly the same myself under the circumstances, Pring. Your first duty was to the women and children under your care. That view, I am certain, will be accepted by the company and the Government, to say nothing of the public, when it gets out. About these men, again, did you judge them to be American or foreigners?"

"They didn't speak much, except to give a few orders. But what they *did* say I heard, every word. I was with them all the time, and so was Mr. Rickaby here. I'll spring another surprise on you, Sir John, and then I've done. *Those chaps were English, every one of them.* And, what's more, they weren't any plug-ugly crowd neither! They were educated men of some social position, club men at some time or other, or I'm a short sport!"

The second officer spoke. "Captain Pring is perfectly right, sir," he said modestly. "I'll swear that they had been public school or 'Varsity men at some time or other."

"Where were you?" I asked quickly.

"Harrow, sir."

I nodded. Here was another astounding fact for consideration when I was alone.

"And then, after a time," Pring continued, "the *Sant Iago* tramp steamer freighter came up from way down South and rescued us. After that we sighted the lights of Mr. Van Adams' air yacht, the *May Flower,* and in answer to our signal he came down and took me and Rickaby aboard."

"Quite," said the laconic millionaire.

"To-night, Captain Pring, I shall want a long talk with you. Now I must surrender you to Sir Joshua. For the present, I want you all three to give me your words of honor that you will tell no one at all anything about the appearance or speed of the ship, that her engines were silent, or you suspect the ruffians on her to be English. That is most important. In fact, I must make it an order, under the powers with which I am invested by the Secretary of State. As an order, it cannot apply to you, Mr. Van Adams, but you have been so kind and helpful hitherto that I feel sure you'll give me your promise? You must see how necessary it is."

Mr. Van Adams was going to use his word-of-all-work, I saw it coming, when he changed his mind.

"I'm on," he said instead.

The two pilots gave me their assurances, and we

walked out of the office together. As we went along the terrace Pring pointed down to the sea-drome, where the millionaire's air yacht, a beautiful boat, painted cream color and black, was now resting at her moorings.

"The *Atlantis* starts to-night," he said significantly.

"She will be escorted by an armed patrol," I said, "until she meets one of the American A.P. ships in mid-ocean. Surely, you don't think there's any danger?"

To tell the truth, I had been so concentrated upon the matter in hand that I had hardly given a thought to the outgoing liner. Can you blame me? Anyway, duty came before any private considerations. Now, Pring's remark started a new set of thoughts. I looked at him with great anxiety. He did not know the whole of my reason, but he saw that I was disturbed.

"No, Sir John," he answered, "I don't think the danger worth the waggle of a mule's ear. It was only a passing remark. It stands to reason that Captain Kidd'll know that the police boats of two hemispheres are out looking for him in swarms by now. He'll figure that out, sure. If he was to start any of his stunts within the next few days, he'd have about as much chance as a fat man in Fiji."

"That's what I thought."

"You may make your mind easy about the *Atlantis,*

sir. Besides, as you say, to put the lid on, she'll be escorted."

"Quite," I said involuntarily, and then we both laughed.

"Royal Hotel at ten-thirty," I said. "I shall be staying there to-night."

I shall never forget that dinner with Connie. One of her greatest charms is her serene light-heartedness. It is not silliness or frivolity, don't think that, but the bloom upon the fruit of a clear and happy nature whose conscience is at rest. My girl wasn't a fool. She was not ignorant of evil and the gray sides of life. But they left her untouched. Perhaps her very simplicity, the gay and stainless courage that she wore like a flag through life, had helped her to her great success. The British public might admire and enjoy the work of other artists, but they had taken little Connie Shepherd to their hearts.

She was gay at our dinner, bubbling over with joy and fun. I did my best to respond, but it was rather difficult. There was a shadow on my mind, and it would not go away.

"Dearest old John!" she said once, "what is it? You're sad, inside of you, and you're pretending you're not!"

"Darling, in an hour or two you'll be gone. How can I be very happy?"

She shook her head. "It's not that. You can't de-

ceive me. I don't want to part, either, especially on this day of days. But we are both of us sensible, and we both know it's only for six weeks. You aren't in the least sentimental—horrid word!—nor am I. We go deeper than that."

"Well, then, to tell you the truth"—and it *was* the truth—"I am a bit under the weather, and I can't quite say why. Perhaps it's reaction. But most probably, it's because I have been hearing some news, a matter in connection with my work which has excited me. It's a problem of organization I must solve at once. Forgive me, sweetheart!"

"My dear, if you were not what you are, I should never have said 'yes.' No one has ever had such a position as you at your age, and I know how you've fought for it. I *love* you to be preoccupied about your work."

We finished dinner, however, in a happier mood, and then walked down to the sea-drome together. Connie's heavy luggage had gone to New York by steamer a week ago. The two small trunks she had brought with her from London were already on board the *Atlantis,* and Wilson and Thumbwood carried a couple of dressing-bags.

It was a perfect evening. The sun, in going to rest, had hung the sky with banners, golden and glorious. The music of a band upon the pier came softly up to the terrace of the A.P. Station. Young men and

maidens in summer clothes strolled up and down over the greens, and a sickle-shaped new moon was rising over Devonport and the Hamoaze.

We went down in the electric car, and boarded the *Atlantis* from one of my launches. She was lit up in all her triple decks, as we climbed aboard by the saloon accommodation ladder, and a steward took Connie and her maid to her cabin, while I went to find my old friend, Captain Swainson.

The big, bearded man was sitting alone in his little room. There was a cup of black coffee by his side, and he was chewing an unlighted cigar. I saw at once that he had heard something.

"The very man!" he cried, jumping up from his basket chair and gripping me warmly by the hand. "I heard you were here, Sir John, and I made sure of seeing you before I started. Now what's all this? Sir Joshua's half out of his mind with worry, the offices are turned upside down, and Seth Pring—confound him!—is as close as an oyster!"

I found out that he knew just what Sir Joshua knew, and no more. He was indignant but quite cool, inclined to minimize the whole affair.

It seemed to me that to tell him the whole truth would serve no good purpose.

Pilot Superintendent Lashmar, whom I was going to send in command of the escort, would, of course, know everything.

"Well, I'm sending an escort with you half-way across," I said. "Lashmar will go—you know him?—in No. 1 Patrol Boat. It's heavily armed, and he can shoot straighter than any man in the service. Got his experience in the Great War."

"Escort be blowed!" said hearty Captain Swainson. "I can't think what old Pring was about to let himself be held up like that—though, of course, it's just as you wish, Sir John."

"I don't suppose there's the least need of it, Swainson. But this business'll make a bit of a noise, and it looks well. Now I'll tell you a secret. I'm engaged to be married! Settled it coming down in the train this morning."

"The deuce you are! A thousand congratulations!"

"Thanks. What's more, the lady is aboard your ship, and flies to New York with you to-night. I want you to look after her for me."

"Can a duck swim? Well, this *is* news! Now I understand about that escort! But do introduce me, Sir John. It will be more than a pleasure to make the young lady comfortable."

We went off to seek Connie, and found her sitting behind one of the multiplex wind-screens on the saloon deck, listening to the music of a piano and violin that came through the open hatch of the palm-court below.

I remember that the musicians were playing a selec-

tion of old English airs, sweet, plaintive music, and had just got to "The Last Rose of Summer."

I'm not emotional, but when I hear that tune to-day —thank goodness, it isn't often!—I go out of the room.

At a quarter to nine I stood on the Hoe and watched the *Atlantis* start for America. Her navigation lights were all turned on; the innumerable port-holes of the huge fusilage made an amber necklace below the immense gray planes.

Then, from the towers on the sea-drome wall the "flare-path" shot out—an avenue of white and steady light to guide the liner outwards. From the roof of the A.P. Station the compressed air-horn sent out three long, brazen calls. I had arranged it so. It was my Godspeed to Constance. Old Swainson answered on his Klaxon, and then the liner began to move slowly over the glittering water. Every second she increased her speed and lifted until she rose clear and slanted upwards. I had a vision of the mysterious silvery thing like a moth in the center of the light-beam, and then the flare-path shifted out to sea, and rose till it was almost at a right angle with the water. The *Atlantis* was spiraling up to her ten-thousand-foot level, and in a moment or two she was nothing more than a speck.

Just as I lost sight of her, Patrol Ship No. 1 lifted

and followed like a hawk after a heron, and then both ships were lost in the night.

The band on Plymouth Pier was still playing. The young men and maidens were still strolling round the lawns in the moonlight. The air was sweet and pure, full of laughter and the voices of girls. But I went back to the station with a heavy heart.

Two shorthand clerks and two telegraphists were waiting for me, and in the next hour I got through an infinity of work. There was a mass of telegrams to answer from America. They had been re-wired from Whitehall. I had to send out fifty or sixty signals to organize a complete patrol of the Atlantic air-lanes. There was a long and confidential "wireless" to my assistant, Muir Lockhart, in London, and last, though by no means least, a condensed report of everything for the Home Secretary. It was after ten when I had finished, and I walked slowly back to the "Royal," dead tired in mind and body. When I came to think of it, I realized that this had been one of the most eventful and exciting days of my life.

Thumbwood—you will hear a great deal about him before this narrative is over—was waiting in the hall. He hurried me upstairs to where a tepid bath dashed with ammonia was waiting. Five minutes in this, a brisk rub down, a complete change into evening kit, a tea-cup of Bovril with a tablespoon of brandy and a

pinch of celery salt in it—what Thumbwood called my "bran-mash"—and I was a new man again.

For a perfect valet commend me a man who has had charge of racehorses in his time!

Then I went down to meet Captain Pring. I saw at once, as I came into the public rooms of the hotel, that the news was out. Groups of people were standing together and talking earnestly. There was a buzz of suppressed excitement, natural anywhere, but particularly so in the principal air-port of England.

And there were special editions of the evening papers. . . .

These—I got one and looked—had made the most of very scanty material. Nothing like the whole truth had leaked out, but there was, nevertheless, a sensation of the first magnitude. I was recognized and pointed to; a naval captain even spoke, and tried to pump me!—though he soon found that there was nothing doing—and when Captain Pring came into the lounge some idiot started to cheer, and there was what the papers describe as a "scene."

Pring and I supped alone in a private room and had a long confidential talk, in the course of which I learnt many things. I am not going to give any details of that talk at present. It was momentous—it is enough to say that now—and has its proper place further on in the story.

The worthy Captain went at twelve, and I retired to

bed. Thumbwood slept in a dressing-room opening out of my bedroom. By his couch was a telephone, which I arranged was to be connected with the A.P. Station all night long. If any signal came Thumbwood was to take it, and, if important, wake me at once.

. . . I am going to conclude this first portion of the narrative in as few lines as possible. Even to-day I shirk the writing of them.

I was awakened suddenly to find my room blazing with light; I afterwards found that the exact time was 2.30 a.m.

Thumbwood was standing by the bed. "Sir John," he said hoarsely, "there's a signal!"

One glance at the lad's face was enough, and I set my teeth—hard.

"Bad news?"

"Terrible news, Sir John!"

"Go on."

"*Atlantis* attacked two hundred miles west of Cork. Captain Swainson and four other men shot dead. Patrol Boat No. 1 disabled. Commander Lashmar and most of the crew killed. Signal got through by two survivors of crew, who managed to repair wireless."

Twice I swallowed with a dry mouth. Thumbwood knew what I wanted to ask.

"The young lady, Sir John, and her maid . . ."

"Dead, too?"

"No, Sir John. They were taken from among all the other passengers and put aboard the pirate ship, which then flew away with them."

CHAPTER IV

THE NEWSPAPERS IN FULL CRY

YOU are to imagine, if you please, the private room of the Chief Commissioner of Air Police at Whitehall.

A soft Turkey carpet of dull brick-reds and blues covers the parquet floor. The walls are hung with pictures of famous airmen of the past, inventors, fighters, pioneers of the great commercial service of air-liners which now fills the skies and has shrunk the planet—for all practical purposes—to a fifth of its former size. There are two or three huge writing-tables covered with crimson morocco; the chairs are thickly padded and luxurious. A range of tall windows looks down upon the endless stir and movement of the wide street, where the nerves of Empire meet in one central ganglion.

Standing by one of these windows is a light-haired young man of thirty in a lounge suit of dark blue. He wears a rather heavy, carefully-trimmed mustache, and his face is seamed and furrowed with anxiety and gray from want of rest.

Thus you see me in London, two days after Thumbwood brought the terrible news to my bedroom in the hotel at Plymouth.

General Sir Hercules Nichelson, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Flying Corps, had been with me for half an hour, and was just taking his leave.

"Then all that is satisfactorily arranged, Sir John," he said. "We shall supplement your patrol ships with three war-ships at Plymouth and three at the Scillies. They will, of course, be air cruisers, both faster and better armed than your boats, and between us both we shall put an end to this pest before many days are over."

"I sincerely trust so," I said. "And I do not see how it is possible that there should be any further outrages. The net will be too close. America, with its much greater coastal area, is taking extraordinary precautions."

"It will be impossible for these devilish scoundrels to escape," the General repeated with confidence—the onus of it all was not falling upon *him!*—"and now, we quite understand one another."

"Perfectly, I think, Sir Hercules."

"Your chief station officer is to be in full command, under you, at each air-port."

"It was your suggestion, Sir Hercules, and since it came from you, I do think it would be best. My men

are always patrolling the air-lines. The organization is complete already."

"Exactly. And as for my fellows, they will be proud to serve under such gallant and experienced officers as those of the A.P."

"It's kind of you to say so."

"Not at all. It is the truth. And now, as an older man, let me give you a little advice, if I am not taking a liberty. Don't let this affect you too much, Sir John. Every sane man knows that neither you nor anyone else could have avoided what has happened, or have provided against it. It is a great thing to have an acute sense of responsibility; I honor you for it. But don't overdo it. I know the strain you are enduring. Don't let it go too far. If you were to break down now, that would be a final disaster. . . ."

The kind, white-haired old man shook me warmly by the hand, and left the room.

Almost immediately young Bickenhall, my private secretary, came in. "Here is the morning's Press, sir," he said, and upon my table he put down various columns cut from the journals of that morning—all dealing with the sensational and terrible events on the Atlantic that were now the common knowledge of the world.

I sat down to glance through them—I was keeping an iron grip upon myself these times—in order to gage public opinion. It occurs to me that, in order to

acquaint you with the progress of events from my awakening at Plymouth till the morning of which I speak, I cannot do better than quote a paragraph here and there from the daily papers. It will bring us up to date more quickly and concisely than in any other way.

This, then, from one of the leading London journals, a weighty, somewhat ponderous sheet, with considerable influence:

". . . We have given an account of the first attack upon the air-liner *Albatros,* under command of Captain Pring, whose conduct in such a trying situation did not deviate from the best traditions of our British aviators. Most people would have thought that after such a dastardly outrage, the unknown pirate would have been content to rest upon his infamous laurels and retire to his lair, with the valuable booty he had secured. But it was not so. With an audacity unparalleled in the annals of crime, this vulture, on the very next night, commits an outrage which, for ferocity and daring, makes the first one seem like a mere frolic.

"It is now possible to disentangle something of the truth from the various conflicting stories that have reached us, and it is, moreover, confirmed in its essential details by the authorities of the Air Police at Whitehall, who have issued a guarded statement.

"It appears that two nights ago the famous air-liner

Atlantis left the Plymouth sea-drome about nine in the evening. The Captain, Commander Pilot Swainson, was one of the best known and trusted officers in the Transatlantic service. He did not anticipate the slightest danger. Sir John Custance, Chief Commissioner of the Air Police of Great Britain, was himself at Plymouth, having hurried down from London upon receiving news of the first piracy. Sir John insisted that the *Atlantis* should be escorted, for half of her journey to America, by the armed Patrol Ship '1,' under command of Superintendent Pilot-Commander Lashmar, D.S.O., himself an officer of great distinction. Half-way across the Atlantic the liner was to be met by a similar escort of the United States A.P., and let us here say that it is difficult to tell what other precautions Sir John Custance could have devised.

"The *Atlantis* carried the Royal Mail and a full complement of passengers, among whom were some distinguished names. Mr. Bootfeller, of the United States Senate, Mr. Greenwell, the well-known publisher, the Duke of Perth, and 'Walty Priest,' the cinema 'star,' were among the men, while in the list of ladies was Miss Constance Shepherd, a young actress, of whom it is not too much to say that she has endeared herself to the British public.

"About two o'clock in the morning disastrous and terrible news began to filter through to the Plymouth wireless stations. It can be summarized as follows:

When not more than two hundred and fifty miles west of Ireland, the patrol ship, which was flying three miles or so behind the *Atlantis,* was suddenly attacked by an unknown airship. The moon had set, the ten-thousand-feet level was dark, and the attack was delivered without the slightest warning. Patrol Ship No. 1 was instantly disabled by a rain of shells. Captain Lashmar was shot dead, and with him perished all of the crew except three men, one of whom was so seriously wounded that his life is despaired of, the other two being only slightly wounded.

"An utter wreck, the patrol ship was just able to descend to the water, where she rested like a wounded and dying bird.

"Meanwhile the unknown ship caught up with the *Atlantis* and commenced—as in the case of the *Albatros*—with shooting away her wireless aerials. The rudder and stern propeller were then destroyed, and the great liner forced to plane to the surface of the water. Six masked and armed ruffians went aboard of her, and a systematic looting of the ship commenced. Captain Swainson could not bear this. He drew a revolver and shot one of the pirates dead. Then, calling on his crew to assist him, he made a determined rush, regardless of consequences. The fight was unequal. Captain Swainson was the only defender who carried fire-arms, while the robbers were provided with heavy automatic pistols.

"Five men of the *Atlantis* were killed almost instantly, and the rest cowed, while the systematic robbery continued. And now, alas! 'horrors upon horror's head accumulate' Their evil work completed, the ruffians sought out Miss Constance Shepherd and her maid, Miss Wilson, from among the passengers. These unfortunate ladies were forced at the pistol's mouth to embark upon the pirates' small boat, in which they were rowed rapidly to the pirate ship and taken on board. The ship then rose from the water and was lost to sight.

"Meanwhile two heroes were at work. On board the broken patrol ship two able navigators, Paget and Fowles, were wounded, indeed, but not entirely disabled. Both men had some knowledge of wireless, and with superhuman toil, as the hours went on, they contrived to rig up a temporary apparatus which, at last, served to send out a brief account of the disaster and a call for help.

"When rescue ships arrived at early dawn, they found that the patrol ship had drifted close to the *Atlantis,* and that Dr. Weatherall, the surgeon of the liner, had swum aboard the No. 1 and rendered what help he could to the wounded men.

"Press representatives are at Plymouth, but, so far, few of the passengers of the *Atlantis* have been able, and none have been allowed by the authorities, to make

personal statements for publication. This embargo, we are assured, will be removed by this evening.

"This is a precise account of what has happened. We must now turn to the consideration of the situation. . . ."

Another journal, a weekly one this time, headed its remarks with a portrait of my unhappy self. Underneath was written: "The Man the Atlantic Pirates tricked!" The rag had an immense circulation in all the tap rooms of England.

Well, I would see what the blackguards of the country were reading about me. Shrewd young Bickenhall wouldn't have brought the unclean thing in if he hadn't thought it worth while. I give it for what it's worth:

"Poor Johnny Custance! You're up against it good and thick to-day, and no mistake, and Paul Pry"—this was the signature of the tout who wrote the article—"can't say he's very sorry for you. For some time past a little bird has been whispering in the clubs that all is not well in the State of Denmark—to wit, the office of the Commissioner of Air Police at Whitehall. The aristocratic young gentlemen who daily condescend to drop into this palatial edifice for an hour or two have long held the reputation of being the best dressed of all our minor Government officials, and, con-

sidering the salaries they draw from the public purse, this is not surprising. But I have never yet heard that they did any work worth mentioning, or, indeed, anything to justify their precious and beautiful existence.

"Flying Police we must have, and never has the necessity for them been greater than at this moment; but there is a vast deal of difference from the handy pilot of a patrol ship at Plymouth or Portland and the bureaucratic popinjays of Pall Mall.

"Sir John Custance, Bart., is the typical Government official of the musical comedy or the comic paper. He is an aristocrat who, after a short experience in the air, is shoved into the highly-paid and responsible position he holds without any reason that the man in the street can understand. A baronet, and, if report speaks truly, a man of considerable private means, I have—in common with many other people—often asked myself what possible qualification this young gentleman can have for his job. Johnny is a most estimable person, no doubt, in private life. I have heard it remarked that his mustache is one of the most perfect things in the West End of London, and he is frequently to be seen adorning a stall or box at the Parthenon Theatre. But few people have ever taken him seriously as the head of our Air Police, and now nobody will."

There was a row of stars here, as if Mr. Paul Pry

paused for breath, or was stopping to pick up another handful of mud, and then he went on again:

"If the nation is called upon to pay thousands and thousands a year for the upkeep of an efficient service of Air Police, it is entitled to see that it gets it, and that the man in charge is able to provide it. What has happened? A crew of murdering ruffians in an airship have looted two of our greatest air-liners, slaughtered several people, kidnapped one of our most popular actresses, and escaped scot-free. Vanished into the wide! While Sir John Custance twiddles his thumbs in Whitehall and calls upon the air forces of the Admiralty and War Office to supplement his own miserably inefficient organization.

"As usual, we are not without some very special and exclusive information in this office. My readers know from past experience that their Paul is not easily caught napping. I believe that I shall have something to say that will startle everyone in next week's number, though, for certain reasons, I cannot be more explicit at present. Before concluding these remarks, however, I must say a word or two about the extraordinary and sinister disappearance of delightful Constance Shepherd. Sad as it is to hear of brave men shot down while doing their duty, there is something peculiarly terrible in the carrying off of the little lady to whom London owes so much. Dear little

Connie! We of Bohemia knew and loved you well! Many is the happy hour that Paul Pry has spent in your company, many the bumper of bubbly water he has quaffed to your success!

"No one could possibly have foreseen such a tragic ending to the American journey which Miss Shepherd set out upon with such high hopes. And yet, there was not wanting a slight shadow of premonition. Only a week ago she said to me: 'Paul, I'm not so sure, after all, that everything will go well. There are certain things. I can't tell you of them——' But I must refrain from betraying a confidence. Let it be enough to say that my little friend had her moments of dejection, when she was not entirely happy about the future."

I put down the paper and rang for Bickenhall.

"You've read this, I suppose?" I asked, pointing to it.

He nodded. "Lies, of course," he said; "mere words to fill up the column."

"No doubt. Still, the man hints all sorts of things, damn him! And one can't neglect any possible clue." I was in a raging fury, and Bickenhall saw it, though he was far from suspecting the true cause.

"The office is in the Strand," he said, "three minutes by taxi. I'll go and interview this Paul Pry and put the fear of God into him."

I knew my Bickenhall. He is an energetic and hefty young man, and though I had little hopes that he would discover anything of value, I had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Paul Pry was about to experience a peculiarly unpleasant ten minutes.

I was right in both my conjectures.

The secretary returned in half an hour. "Just a ramp," he said. "I found a greasy ruffian smelling of gin in a back room, and frightened him out of his life. He's never met Miss Shepherd, and has no private information whatever. Will apologize in any manner you like."

I am not going to bother you with what the journalists wrote. There were hundreds of columns of suggestions, conjecture, reproof, alarm, and so forth. On the whole my department was let down fairly lightly, and I was glad. Please don't think that I cared twopence for myself. I did not. But I should have bitterly resented any serious reflections on my staff, officers and men, who were, and are, as able and loyal a body as can be found anywhere in the world.

CHAPTER V

THE FAMILIAR SPIRIT OF MR. VAN ADAMS

AT mid-day I had an appointment with the Home Secretary. He received me with the utmost kindness, and we had half an hour of highly confidential talk. The purport of it will appear later. This is not the place for it.

Towards the end I informed him that I had a request to make.

"Tell me," he answered at once, "and let me repeat that the Government has every confidence in you, Sir John. Don't take this too hardly, I beg of you."

I had a sudden impulse. "I trust," I said, "that my anxiety for the public welfare is in no degree overshadowed by a private sorrow. Indeed, I am sure that it isn't. But, if I may speak in confidence, I should like you to know, sir, that I was engaged to be married to Miss Constance Shepherd."

There was a perceptible silence. I heard the great man take a long inward breath, and murmur to himself, "Poor fellow!" Then he did the right, the quite

perfect thing: he stretched out his hand, and took mine in a firm, warm grasp.

When I could speak, I returned to business.

"My request, sir, is this. I want to disappear for a month."

"Disappear, Sir John?"

"That's what it amounts to. Practically, I am going to ask for four weeks' leave of absence. It must be private, though. If the news were published the public would misunderstand, and think I was deserting my post in a time of difficulty and danger."

"Whereas?"

"Whereas I want to investigate this affair in my own way. I believe that the theories of the Press and public, and also those of Scotland Yard—with whom I have been in consultation—are quite wrong. Nor do my communications with America give me any reason to change my opinion. This is a matter of life and death to me. I owe the Government, who have promoted me so rapidly to the high position I occupy, a solution of this mystery. I owe them and the public that the fiends who have committed these outrages should be brought to justice. And, if God allows me, I will do it. My honor and that of my department are at stake. Those two things come before anything else. In addition, I have the private reasons of which I have told you. And, in order to succeed, I am persuaded that my way is the only way."

"You have certainly the strongest motives a man well could have to urge you on. But can you be a little more explicit?"

"I want to leave Mr. Muir Lockhart in charge at the office. He is perfectly capable of taking charge. He has everything at his fingers' ends. And I shall arrange that he can always communicate with me at any time."

The Home Secretary thought for a moment, and drummed with his fingers on the arm of his chair. He had been a famous barrister, and renowned for the perfection of his turn-out. His finger-nails were pink and polished as the light fell upon them, and I wondered if he had them manicured.

Then he looked up. "Very well, do as you like," he said suddenly. "I take it that you know what you're about. And heartfelt good wishes for your success."

. . . This is how I plunged into a series of dangerous adventures, a dark underworld of crime and almost superhuman cunning, probably without parallel in modern times.

Arrangements were soon made at Whitehall. Muir Lockhart was an understanding man, and by three o'clock in the afternoon I walked out into the sunshine free from all official cares for a month. I took a long, deep breath as I crossed the Horse Guards Parade and made my way to the long, green vista of

the Mall. "The first act is over," I thought. "The curtain is rising on the real drama. Somewhere in this world there is a man whose discovery and death I owe to Society and to myself."

I have given you but little indication of my mental state during the last few days. It won't bear much writing about even now. A cold fury, instead of blood, came and went in my veins, and my heart was ice. Every now and again, especially when I was alone, agony for which there is, there can be, no name got hold of me, and sported with me as the wind sports with a leaf. I suppose I had a tiny foretaste of what is felt by a soul that is eternally damned. I *dared* not think too much of Constance and her fate. If I had let myself go that way the running waters would have risen and overwhelmed me utterly. But, thank God, my intellect held. The streak of hardness which had served me so well in my career, and had enabled me to push to the top at an early age, came to the rescue now. Every faculty was sharpened; the will concentrated to a single purpose. I was alone, and I walked in darkness, but I was conscious of Power—charged to the brim as a battery is charged with the electric fluid. As I walked calmly up St. James', on the way to my chambers, I doubt if a more single-minded and dangerous man than I walked the streets of London.

And I knew, by some mysterious intuition, that

I should succeed in the task before me. I had not, as yet, more than the most rudimentary idea how I was going to set about it, but I should succeed. Don't misunderstand me. I had hardly any hope of seeing my dear love alive again. I believed that all the joy of life was finally extinguished. But justice—call it vengeance rather—remained, and I was as sure that I was the chosen instrument of that as I was that I had just passed between Marlborough House and the Palace of St. James.

My expensive but delightful chambers in Half Moon Street were on the second floor—sitting-room, dining-room, bed and dressing rooms and bath.

The sitting-room was paneled in cedar-wood, which had been stained a delicate olive-green, with the moldings of the panels picked out in dull gold. Connie and her gay young friends, when they came to have tea with me, or supper after the theater, used to say that it was one of the most charming rooms in London.

I had spent an infinity of time and money on it, determined that it should be "just so." For instance, the carpet was from Kairowan in Tunisia, and had taken a whole family of Arab weavers five years to make. Never was there a more perfect blue—not the crude peacock color of the cheaper Oriental rugs, but a blue infused with a silver-ash shade, contrasting marvelously with the warm brick-reds and tawny yellows. It was a bargain at four hundred pounds.

I had hung only half a dozen pictures in this room, all modern and all good. My "Boys Bathing," by Charles Conder—better known as the painter of marvelous fans—was a masterpiece of sunlight and sea foam which made me the envy of half the collectors in town. Then I had a William Nicholson—"Chelsea Ware"—that was extraordinarily fascinating. It was just some old Chelsea plates and a jug standing on a table. It doesn't sound fascinating, I know, but the painting was so brilliant, there was such vision in the way it was seen, that one could look at it for hours.

There was an open hearth of rough red brick in the room, deep and square, and when there was a fire it burned in a gipsy brazier of iron. I had a lot of trouble to get this last of the right shape, and finally it had to be made for me, from the design of an artist in Birmingham.

Such a room, with its perfect color harmonies and severe lines, required no knick-knacks. Nothing small or petty, however beautiful in itself, could be allowed there. I had two cabinets of magnificent china in my dining-room, but china would have been quite out of place here. Along one wall, about four feet from the floor, was a single shelf of old pewter—cups and flagons of the Tudor period with the double-rose hall-mark—and that was all.

As I entered and flung myself wearily into a chair, the afternoon sunlight poured in through the half-

drawn curtains of sea-green silk. In the ceiling a hidden electric fan was whirring, and the room was deliciously cool. And as I looked round, the place seemed hateful beyond all expression. I was sick of it, loathed its beauty and comfort; an insane desire came to take a hammer and wreak havoc there as my eyes fell on the only photograph in the room. It was one of Constance, in a frame of dull silver, studded with turquoises, and she had given it to me no longer than a fortnight ago.

Thumbwood slept at the top of the house. He came in, after I had been resting for a few minutes.

"I've made the necessary arrangements, Charles," I said, "and we shall start operations at once." I had no secrets from this devoted friend and servant.

"Glad to hear it, Sir John. I've been round the town this morning, and there's a lot of talk."

He followed me into the sitting-room and brought me cigars.

"You see," he went on confidentially, "a gentleman's servant, especially if he belongs to the club just off Jermyn Street, and more specially still if he's been a racing man, hears all that's going on quicker than anyone. This morning I've been talking to the porters and valets of two of the best clubs, Sir John. Then I 'ad a crack with Meggit, the bookmaker, what does all the St. James' smaller commissions, and after that I strolled to the Parthenon Theatre, and took

out the stage door-keeper and filled him up and made 'im talk a bit. 'Im and me is great friends consequent of my taking so many messages and flowers for you, sir, when Miss Shepherd was acting there."

"Ah! I see you haven't wasted your time." I smiled inwardly at Thumbwood's idea of helping me.

"No, Sir John. I've learned a lot of funny little things, just trifles, so to say, but they may prove useful later on. There's one thing you ought to know at once. Them theatricals have been talking, and it's all over town that Miss Shepherd traveled down to Plymouth with you. It's certain to be in the papers this afternoon, if it ain't already. There's been half a dozen reporters buzzing round the theater this morning."

I ground my teeth with anger, but only for a moment. Of course, the thing was inevitable. There was only one thing to do.

I took up the telephone on the writing-table and got put on to the *Evening Wire*. "I am Sir John Custance," I said to the editor. "I hear that there is a good deal of talk going about London in respect of Miss Constance Shepherd and myself. To avoid the least misconception, I authorize you to state, in your next edition, that Miss Shepherd and I were engaged to be married. I'll send my servant down to your office at once, with a note confirming this conversation."

It was the only way, much as I hated it, to stop

malicious gossip, and I scribbled a chit to the editor.

"Get into a taxi and take that at once," I said to Thumbwood. As I gave him the letter, there was a ring at the front-door bell.

The little man went out and I heard voices, one harsh and deep, that seemed familiar.

"Who is it?" I asked as Charles returned. "I can't see anyone. . . ."

"Wouldn't take any denial, sir. It's the American gentleman who picked up Captain Pring after the attack on the *Albatros*. Says he must see you."

"Mr. Van Adams?"

"Yes, Sir John."

"Show him in."

A moment afterwards I was shaking hands with the thickset man whose jaw was like a pike's and whose eyes resembled animated steel. Thumbwood went off with the letter. I heard the front door close after him.

Now I don't suppose at that moment I would have seen any other man in London unconnected with my office at Whitehall. I didn't want to see the millionaire, but directly he was inside the room my irritation vanished. He had meant to see me. He had now accomplished his end, and I had a firm conviction that sentries with fixed bayonets wouldn't have kept him out.

He sat down quietly in the chair I indicated, and

took a cigar with great deliberation. I was not in the least impatient. I knew now that I was glad that he had come, and waited for him to begin. When he did speak the harsh voice was considerably modified, and no one whatever could have said that he was an American.

"Any success I may have made in life," he said without preliminary, "has come from the faculty of judging men. I started, as a youth, with this power in a more than ordinary degree. I've been developing it ever since."

He puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. He had said this with calm determination, not in the least as if he were speaking of himself, but merely as a man stating a fact which would be useful a little later on.

For my part I said nothing. I felt as though I was playing a sort of decorous game with rigid rules. To speak then would be to revoke!

". . . And, though the ordinary man does not like to hear such a statement, I have a pretty good idea of you, Sir John. You're not an ordinary man. That's why I'm here. I'll put it in two words. I want to help you. I *can* help you. It is for you to say if you want me."

Now there could only be one answer to a question like that. The man in my arm-chair was one of the most powerful men on earth. Moreover, his reputa-

tion stood high. He was no financial pirate. The whole world trusted him.

"I answer that, Mr. Van Adams, with a single word: Thank you."

He nodded as if pleased. "Quite!" he said, and then, half turning in his chair, "of course, I don't ask you to tell me any official secrets. . . ."

I laughed at that. The Government would have let this man know all there was to be known upon his simple request.

He saw that I understood. "There are none for one thing," I told him. "You know exactly as much as my department knows, as I told the Home Secretary this morning. There are no developments, except, of course, the protective measures we and the States are taking. The one thing I *can* tell you, and which is in strict confidence, is that I have arranged for my official duties to be carried on by my assistant for a month. From this afternoon I am absolutely free to do what I like and go where I like. No one will know of this but my confidential servant. I intend to devote this evening to mapping out a plan of campaign."

"That's good, Sir John. That is just what I wanted to hear. Let me explain my motives. They are not complicated. One is that, as one of the chief money-brokers of the world, I naturally want to prevent any financial panic. Next, I am a bit of a sportsman in

my way. I like hunting things down. This pursuit appeals to me a good deal. And, last—when I was five-and-thirty, a desperate gang of crooks in San Francisco kidnapped my little daughter Pearl—she that is Duchess of Shropshire now—and held her up to ransom. It was before you took notice, for I'm close on seventy, but the episode created some considerable stir at the time. I can pretty well guess what you are going through now."

As he looked at me his eyes were no longer like living steel, nor his jaw like a pike's.

So he also knew! I mumbled something or other.

"Quite," he answered quickly, and then went on: "In thinking over various ways in which I could be of use I have come to a certain conclusion. Money, I suppose, won't help you—though, of course, any sum is available?"

"I have the Government behind me, and I myself am not poor, thank you."

"It is as I thought. In England I myself can do nothing *personally* that others cannot do as well. In America I have every sort of influence. . . ."

I looked him in the face. "I am not going to trouble about America in the very least."

"Quite! I see what you mean. And I am absolutely of your opinion. Now I'll come to what I *can* do for you."

He rose slowly from his chair and came up to me. When he spoke he had dropped his voice a full tone.

"I must let you into one or two little secrets about myself," he said. "In the first place, a man so rich as I am does not become so without making powerful and unscrupulous enemies. Also, American methods are direct. It will probably surprise you to hear that my life has been attempted twelve or fifteen times, but that is the case. Some of the methods were diabolically ingenious, too! However, I stand here to-day, quite unharmed and quite safe. Why? I'll tell you.

"Quite early in my successful career I saw what would happen. I watched other men assassinated, and was determined that it shouldn't happen to me. How was it to be avoided? I thought that point out very carefully, and came to a conclusion. I must find, and then attach to my person, someone of extraordinary intelligence, cunning, skill and personal prowess. My ambitions ran high. I wanted someone who would devote his whole life to my service, a familiar spirit, no less! It took me three years of steady work to find that familiar spirit—to discover the exact combination of qualities I required. But a multi-millionaire is the Magician of to-day, and I have a Genie as clever and infallible as any out of the old 'Arabian Nights.' I pay him the salary of a cinema star, and I say, meaning every word of it, that there isn't another like him in the world. Do you think this tall talk, Sir John?"

It was certainly amazing, but I could not but believe him.

"You startle and you interest me deeply," I replied. "You are to be congratulated."

"I am—on a unique human possession. Well, you can't have failed to see what I'm driving at. I will lend you this man, place his services entirely at your disposal, for a month!"

For a moment or two I was silent. I believed every word that Van Adams said, and I was not hesitating —only just letting the offer, and what it meant, sink into my mind. It became plain. It was like the offer of a rope-ladder to a man in prison, a light and a pickax to an entombed miner.

"It is the most generous offer I've ever heard of, Mr. Van Adams. I can't express my thanks. You really mean this?"

"I do. And as an ounce of proof is worth a ton of talk—allow me to introduce you to Mr. Danjuro!"

He turned round as he spoke and I with him. Then I gave a cry of astonishment, which I could not have kept back to save my life.

Standing some yard or so away was a little Japanese gentleman, not much more than five feet high. He wore gold pince-nez, a neat blue lounge suit and brown boots. There was nothing noticeable about him in any way, except an unusually fine cranial development

—a massive forehead and a great space between the corners of the dark eyes and the ears.

"Good heavens, how did he get here?" I said.

Van Adams laughed. "I daresay he'll tell you; I don't know," he answered. "I just told him to be here. I wanted to give you an object lesson, in fact. Now, Mr. Danjuro knows all that I know. You can trust him absolutely. He knows what is in front of him, and he knows where to find me when I'm wanted. Now I'll leave you together and say good-afternoon."

He was gone almost before I could thank him.

CHAPTER VI

MR. DANJURO, THINKING MACHINE, EXPLAINS HIMSELF

"WON'T you sit down?" I said foolishly.

The little Japanese bowed politely and did so.

I was at a loss what to say. My mind was in a whirl. I wanted to laugh, to call Van Adams back, but my dominating sensation was one of supreme annoyance. So this natty, commonplace little Asiatic was the millionaire's "familiar spirit"! He was unique, was he! I cursed myself for several kinds of fool to have saddled myself with this amazing stranger at the beginning of my work. At any rate, I reflected irritably, as I sat down opposite, I could easily send him off on some wild-goose chase or another. . . .

Yes! I was never more annoyed in my life, and my annoyance lasted for exactly sixty seconds. Without the slightest embarrassment of any sort, and with no preliminaries at all, Mr. Danjuro plunged into business. His voice was clear and low. He had no accent of any kind, though his English was a trifle

pedantic and scholarly. He spoke as impersonally as a gramophone.

". . . I am entirely with you, Sir John, in your opinion that it is not in the United States of America, but here—in England—that we shall solve the mystery surrounding this dark business."

"But I never said . . ."

He smiled faintly, almost wearily. "And since I have the great honor to be associated with you, I trust you will allow me to suggest a plan of campaign."

"I was going to try and think one out to-night."

"It is a privilege to assist. I have come in contact with many crafty and malignant criminals during the last thirty years, but here one detects a master. It will be a pleasure indeed to hunt him down. Have I your honorable permission to smoke?"

With one hand he produced a square of rice paper and a pinch of tobacco from his pocket, and rolled a cigarette on his knee like a conjuring trick. He had not raised his voice, but a sudden gleam came into the oblique black eyes which suggested the deep but hidden ferocity of his race.

He resumed. "From all I have gathered, and I have talked much with Captain Pring, Mr. Rickaby and the passengers of the *Albatros,* we have to look for a man who is (1) an aviator in the first rank; (2) an inventor and mechanical genius, or able to command

the services of such; (3) a person of some wealth or able to procure money."

I followed him completely and said so. From what we already knew these deductions were perfectly fair ones.

"I thank you. Now we come to the man himself. I believe him to be a person of education, and one who has held a good social position. He is also desperate in his circumstances, and a person to whom material pleasure is the highest good."

"Rickaby said that the men who came aboard the *Albatros* spoke like educated people."

"Yes. Our field of search already begins to grow narrower. Am I right in saying that every aviator in this country must pass an examination and be licensed before he is allowed to fly?"

"It is so. All aviators, professional or amateur, must have a license from the Air Police. This is registered. I have already had the records for the past ten years searched at Whitehall. But this has yielded no result. There is no one who could possibly be our man."

"It was well thought of, Sir John, if I may say so. But in my opinion we shall have to go back a good deal further than ten years. We now come to the question of the pirate airship itself and its peculiar qualities. Let us fix upon one—the silence of its engines. I am aware that the constructors of motor

engines have been busy upon this problem for years."

"And with little result. The problem has not been solved."

"Except by our unknown friends. I have already examined all the recent patents of silencing devices at your patent office here. I spent yesterday morning there, and found nothing. The significance of that is obvious. Any ordinary inventor who had discovered something of such importance would protect it at once. We can therefore make up our minds that in no regular motor-engineering works throughout this country has the complete silencer been evolved. It would be impossible for the most brilliant inventor to keep such a thing entirely to himself."

"Again the field shrinks?"

"Yes, Sir John. We now have a man of the character already indicated, who, as he has undoubtedly constructed silent engines, must have done so in secret. He must have had private engineering works in order to make an important part of his machines. The point is, where? On the Continent? I think not. He would be watched far more carefully than in this country. America is still more unlikely. Let us assume England. Having done so, we can, I think, safely deduce that for obvious reasons this man and his confederates—for we know he has them—would endeavor to build his pirate ship as near as possible to the place he intended to use as the base of his

operations. And that base—if your experience bears me out—is certainly somewhere or other on the coast?"

"Of course, one would say that it must be so, Mr. Danjuro. And yet it seems impossible. The whole coast of England is patrolled by the coastguards. For all practical purposes England is no bigger than a pocket-handkerchief. I thought of Scotland and the Northern Isles. I thought of wild places on the Irish coast. I have had a fleet of airships surveying and photographing these places for the last two days. No hangar bigger than a motor-shed could have escaped their notice. All the land police of the villages round the coasts have been interrogated by Scotland Yard. Nothing, nothing whatever has been seen."

I spoke with some passion, for I felt it. The sense of impotence was maddening.

The Japanese rolled another cigarette. As he did so the door opened and Thumbwood came in.

"I delivered your note, Sir John, and the editor's compliments and thanks."

"Charles," I said, "this gentleman here is Mr. Danjuro. He is going to help us. Mr. Danjuro is"—I hesitated for a moment, really it was difficult to describe him!—"is one of the foremost detectives in the world!"

Thumbwood's hand went up to his forehead in the stable boy's salute. Then, as he saw my guest full-face, he started. "I saw you this morning, sir," he

said. "You were talking to old Mrs. Jessop, the dresser at the Parthenon Theatre. It was in the 'Blue Dragon,' just round the corner by the stage-door."

"And you were with the stage-door keeper. A curious coincidence," Mr. Danjuro replied, with his weary smile, and at a look from me Thumbwood, very puzzled indeed, left the room.

"I spent part of this morning at the Parthenon Theatre, Sir John. Your servant apparently thought of doing the same thing. A man of considerable acumen?—I imagined so. To proceed. Now that we have cleared away a few preliminary obstructions, we arrive at a point which I regard as of great significance. You are engaged—I speak of intimate matters, but purely in my character of a consultant—to Miss Constance Shepherd, a young lady of beauty and celebrity."

. . . Confound the fellow, he spoke of Connie as if she were a fish!

"That is so," I told him.

"That young lady was kidnapped by the unknown airman. From among all the passengers she and her maid were singled out. Now that fact—upon which you must have already pondered considerably—is a key fact. Was it done for the purpose of holding this lady up to ransom? I see the suggestion has been made in the Press. I answer no. In the first place,

it would be altogether too dangerous a game, and the attempt would certainly lead to discovery. Secondly, there were other people on board who would have been more profitable prey. The Duke of Perth, for instance, or the cinema actor who receives sixty thousand pounds a year. Now it is extremely improbable that in the rush and excitement of the attack and robbery of the *Atlantis,* the pirate leader was suddenly struck by a pretty face. Indeed, we know from accounts of the passengers that Miss Shepherd was deliberately searched for. That indicates with certainty that the pirate knew she was on board, and had a design of capturing her. In its turn, this predicates a former acquaintance, and undoubtedly, a repulse in the past. Hence my inquiries and my interview with the theater dresser this morning."

I astonished that little man. It was the first and last time. Leaping up in my chair, I believe I shouted like a madman. At any rate, Thumbwood was inside the room before I could find words to speak.

Something had flashed upon me, white-hot and sudden, as an electric advertisement flashes out upon one at night. It was something that I had entirely and utterly forgotten until now.

"There was a man," I gasped, "a scoundrel who had been annoying Miss Shepherd for a long time. He wanted to marry her. She told me of it. *And he was once a celebrated flying man!*"

"Long ago, in the Great War," said Danjuro calmly. "Major Helzephron, V.C. I was aware of it."

"And one of the boys if ever there was one, sir!" Thumbwood broke in. "Warned off the course everywhere. I've got a bit of information, too!"

I stared at them, trembling with excitement. And then reality, like a cold douche of water, brought me to my senses. Of course, it was impossible. The thing was a mere coincidence. Why, while the first ship—the *Albatros*—had been attacked, this man, Helzephron, was in London! He had traveled west in the same train with me and Connie.

"May I ask exactly what you know, Sir John?"

. . . I told Danjuro precisely what had happened at Paddington and how Connie herself had explained it.

He listened to me in attentive silence. When I had finished, I saw that a small leather pocketbook had appeared in his hands—everything that the fellow did had the uncanny effect of a clever trick—and he was turning over the leaves.

"So far," he began, "in the consideration of this problem we have been eliminating impossibilities, or improbabilities so strong that they amount to that. This has left us with a small residuum of fact, unproved fact, but sufficient to work from. One thing emerges clearly. It is the nature and personality of our unknown friend. It is not too much to say that

he MUST be very like what we have imagined him to be. A certain person appears dimly on the scene—this Major Helzephron. Let us see how his personality squares with the personality we have been deducing. Mr. Thumbwood has apparently collected some information. I have done so, too. Let us pool results!" He looked at Charles, who blushed.

"Out with it, Charles; you've done splendidly," I said.

"Well, Sir John, I found out that this gentleman is a pretty bad wrong-'un, judging by the company he keeps. And he used to annoy Miss Shepherd something chronic. He'd wait at the stage-door and try and speak to her when she got into the car after the performance, and he was always leaving notes and flowers with the stage-door keeper. Miss Shepherd would never take them. She always sent them back from her room. It got so bad at last that she complained to the stage manager, and he had a plain clothes man from Vine Street there one night. Major Helzephron was told off pretty plainly, I hear. He used to come very nasty sometimes, and once or twice he was fair blotto! And Mr. Meggit, the commission agent, knows him well. He's done a lot of racing in his time, and no open scandal. But he knows how to work the market, and the best men won't lay him the odds no more."

I shrugged my shoulders. It was only what one

expected. The man was one of the fast blackguards who infest the West End of London; that was all. There were dozens like him. The facts only seemed to prove that he could not possibly be connected with the Atlantic outrages.

"You see?" I said to the Japanese, sure that he would follow my thought. Then I thanked good little Charles and he left the room.

"That is the surface," Danjuro replied. "I cross-examined a *woman* who was in constant attendance on Miss Shepherd. From her I learnt just what your servant has discovered. But I went a little deeper. It is a case of genuine overmastering passion on the part of this man. Nothing less. He is of a dangerous age for that to come to him, certainly over forty-five years. A woman knows. But that is not all."

"So far we have learnt nothing of importance." I was getting restive, I wanted to be *doing* something. And yet, what was there to do? If I had thought all night by myself I could not have mapped out the situation more clearly. And as I looked at the little man, half lost in a big saddle-bag chair, I felt ashamed of my irritation. A brain packed in ice was there, a logical machine of the first order. I could not expect humanity, sympathy, from such a one. Still, it would have helped! Hadn't I lost the one thing that made life worth living? What might not be happening to Connie even now?

. . . He read my thoughts like a book, confound him!

"I understand your feelings, believe me, Sir John," he said, "but I must go my own way. We have not been talking for an hour yet! And if it is any consolation for you to know, let me say that it is imperative that we leave London to-night."

"My nerves are strained. Please go on," I answered. "I can hardly tell you what a godsend your appearance on the scene really is to me."

"In my business as agent and guard to my patron, Mr. Van Adams, it is always necessary that I keep more or less in touch with a certain circle of what I may describe as the aristocracy, the brains of International Crime. It has proved useful. After my visit to the Parthenon this morning I called upon an old acquaintance, the Honorable James Brookfield."

"Lord Slidon's son? The man who got five years . . ."

"Yes. Of course, everyone knows his name. He made one little slip. Mr. Brookfield is very acute, and a great student of character. Entirely incapable of understanding a man or woman of decent morals and normal instincts, he is infallible in his judgment of the criminal type. Mr. Brookfield owes me any little service he can render, and I supplemented my request for information with a note for fifty pounds."

"And you learnt . . . ?"

"That Major Helzephron is all we have just heard, but a far more sinister and formidable person than anyone suspects. He is a man of marked intellectual powers. Below the veneer of coarse pleasures and fast life in London and Paris, there is something that glows like a hot coal. His appearances in town are irregular and fitful. His real life, Brookfield is certain of this, is lived far away from cities. And it is *a life with a purpose.*"

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly Mr. Danjuro began to reveal himself.

The last words were spoken in a changed voice. The flatness and monotony had vanished. The words vibrated in the room, and I felt the thrill of them. It was the power of personality, and from then onwards I was hand in glove with this bizarre thinking machine that Fate had sent me.

I tried to emulate Danjuro's dispassionate and scientific method.

"It is curious," I said, "that a real intellect should care to spend part of its time in rake-helling round the low clubs, the gambling-rooms and stage-doors of London. Such a thing is known, but it is rare."

"You put your finger instantly upon what seems a weak spot in my character sketch. But let us assume that it has been done with a deep motive."

"Ah!" He knew, or suspected, something more. He referred to his notebook.

"Two years ago a certain Mr. Herbert Gascoigne was expelled from Christ Church College, Oxford."

"Sent down, we call it; but go on."

"The case was a bad one. The young man had established a sort of gambling club and ruined several of his contemporaries. It was discovered that he was using a roulette wheel that had been tampered with. He came to London and drifted into the worst gang of swindlers. Major Helzephron met him. They became very friendly. The younger man was obviously under the influence of the elder. Finally Gascoigne deserted his old haunts and has disappeared."

I began to see light.

"On several occasions my astute friend, Mr. Brookfield, has witnessed precisely the same phenomenon. Some young man of the upper classes has been ruined socially, and our enigmatic friend has taken him up, been seen about with him, and so forth. Finally the young man vanishes."

"It is not philanthropy, Mr. Danjuro."

"It is not, and it gives rise to curious speculations. Where could a Napoleonic criminal, patiently planning and meditating a stupendous coup, find a better recruiting ground than among the desperate and ruined young men of his own class? The plan is in itself evidence of genius. They speak his language, he understands their way of thought; there are a thousand bonds between them. I can conceive no more solid

and formidable combination than just this. The one last virtue remaining to these desperate and outcast young men will be loyalty to their leader. Society has cast them out, therefore they will make war on Society. Given that attitude of mind, a leader like Major Helzephron, and a plan so daring, and the thing becomes plain as daylight. And if this man had not fallen into an overmastering passion for Miss Shepherd there would have been no means of getting on his trail at all."

It was only with great difficulty that I could control my thoughts. We seemed miles nearer the truth than I had been an hour ago. Then one idea emerged clearly.

"Quite so. And isn't it all in our favor that we, and we alone, are in a position to connect Helzephron with the piracy? He will think himself perfectly secure?"

"I do not for a moment believe," Danjuro replied with emphasis, "that a single soul besides ourselves has the least suspicion. The man will have taken supreme care to cover his tracks. My inquiries could have suggested nothing to the people I interviewed. Mr. Brookfield thinks I required my information for quite another reason. Yes, Sir John, we have a task of immense difficulty and danger before us. You must recognize that to the full. My sincere belief is that it would be somewhat safer to venture into a

cage of cobras than where we have to go. But"—he took out his watch—"it is five o'clock. Let us say that the game begins at this moment! Very well. We, and not the enemy, have scored the first point!"

He suddenly glided from his chair with a single sinuous movement. As he stood up he was transformed. The bland modern look faded from his face. It grew terrible. The eyes narrowed to slits of light, the square jaw protruded, the gray lips were caught up in a tiger-grin, and the slim body seemed to swell out with iron muscle like a wrestler stripped in the arena.

You have seen some of the real old Japanese color-prints, pictures of the ancient Samurai or the frightful Akudogi shouting at you—yes? The flat, awful stolidity, the incarnate hate. . . .

Then you have seen something of what I saw then.

Wow! Millionaire Van Adams was well served!

CHAPTER VII

THE CURIOUS FIGHT IN THE RESTAURANT

IT is a good deal to ask, Sir John," said Danjuro briskly, "but, for the moment, will you place yourself entirely in my hands?"

"I am perfectly content to do so."

"Then permit me to press the bell." He did so.

"I left a black bag in the hall," Danjuro said politely when Thumbwood came in. "Would you please let me have it?"

The bag was brought. Danjuro placed it on the table and opened it.

"You are very well known, Sir John," he remarked. "Major Helzephron and his friends have either seen you at some time or other, or have certainly seen the numerous pictures of you that have appeared in the newspapers during the last few days. It is imperative that you change your appearance at once. I foresaw that and have brought materials."

I am afraid I whistled with dismay. The idea didn't please me in the very least. "Is it really necessary? . . ."

"Absolutely. But it will not inconvenience you. Will you go into your bedroom and clip off your mustache with scissors, afterwards shaving the upper lip clean? You see, the man who leaves London to-night must not in the least resemble the Chief Commissioner of Air Police."

I went and did it. I had to. When the operation was over I shouldn't have known myself, it made such a difference. I never knew that I had such a grim and forbidding mouth!

I returned to the sitting-room. Mr. Danjuro did not make the least comment, but he removed my collar and tie with the deftness of a barber and fastened a towel round my neck. Then he sponged my skin all over with some faintly pink stuff out of a bottle. When he had done that, he began on my hair with something else, and finally my eyebrows.

"May I ask what you are doing?" I said after a time.

"I am dyeing your hair black, Sir John. The dye can be removed at any time. The appearance is absolutely natural. The drug I am using is not generally known. I procure it from a friend in the Honcho Dori at Yokohama, and also the liquid which has already changed your skin from blond to swarthy. I will treat your hands in a minute."

I suppose I was three-quarters of an hour under his ministrations before he stepped back and looked at me critically. "Part your hair in the center, in-

stead of at the side, wear a low collar instead of a high one, and spectacles—they can be of plain glass—and you need not have the slightest fear of recognition. In fact, Sir John, as far as outward appearance goes, you have already ceased to exist!"

There was a mirror over the mantel-shelf. I stood up and looked. It was marvelous! It was uncanny, too. A dark-haired, dark-skinned stranger leered out of the glass at me, and I turned away with mingled feelings of amazement and disgust.

"Do you drive an automobile?" the Japanese asked.

I jumped at the suddenness of the question, for my thoughts were far away. "Yes, I have a touring car of my own in a neighboring garage."

"It will be better not to use it. We shall take one of Mr. Van Adams' cars. It is ready."

I laughed. "I've a lot to hear yet, you know, Mr. Danjuro, though I have placed myself in your hands without reserve. But you made very sure of me beforehand, didn't you?"

"It is Mr. Van Adams' command," he answered simply, and I reflected that here, indeed, was a man with a single soul.

"We shall leave London at midnight," he went on, "and drive through the whole of the night. I, also, am an expert chauffeur, and we can relieve each other."

"Thumbwood can drive, too. Of course we take him with us?"

"He will be of the greatest assistance. Now, Sir John, if you want to take a little sleep, now is the time. I should like to consult with your servant, if I may, and have a chat with him. We shall have a good deal to do with one another."

Strangely enough, I did feel drowsy, despite my excitement. A couple of hours' sleep would refresh me wonderfully, and I knew it.

"Very well; I think it is a good suggestion. Say for two hours."

"By all means. I will carry out some other arrangements meanwhile. You shall have full explanations later on, and I thank you sincerely for the confidence you have reposed in me."

While we were talking we had left the room and crossed the hall.

"A pleasant sleep," he said, politely opening the door for me. "We will go and have a look at Major Helzephron later on."

"What?" I shouted.

"He is in London. I have never seen him and I must certainly do so."

"In London?" I cried, a dozen conflicting thoughts crowding and crushing into my mind.

". . . It is the reason that we leave London to-night."

Then he had shut the door on me and was gone. I had known him less than two hours. I was a man accustomed to rule, whose whole life was spent in

giving orders, and I lay down on my bed like a lamb without a further question. And, what is more, I did exactly as Mr. Danjuro had said. I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

At a little after eight Mr. Danjuro and myself sat at dinner at the Restaurant Mille Colonnes. Most people know that expensive and luxurious home of epicures, with Nicholas, its stout and arrogant proprietor, and M. Dulac, its famous chef.

We sat in the south gallery, at the extreme end, against the wall. The electric lights in the roof above us had been extinguished, and our table was lighted by candles in red shades. Indeed, we sat in a sort of darkness which must have made us almost invisible to the other diners, most of whom sat in the longer arm of the gallery at right angles to our own.

We, on the contrary, could see everything. We could look over the gilded rail into the hall of the restaurant below, and every detail of the gallery on our own level was clear and distinct, though there was such a towering erection of flowers and ferns in the center of our table that it obscured what would otherwise have been a perfect view.

I wore a low, turned-down collar and a dark flannel suit. Danjuro, also, had changed his clothes, and, in some real but indefinite way, his appearance. He wore a flannel suit and a straw hat, and also a necktie which I suddenly spotted as that of my old college,

Christ Church, Oxford. But the extraordinary thing about him was that he seemed fifteen years younger.

He had promised to explain at the "Mille Colonnes." As we began upon the salted prawns and the stuffed olives he did so.

"You are now Mr. Johns, an Oxford tutor, Sir John. I am a young Japanese gentleman, my own name will serve, whom you are coaching. We are going into the country with this disguise. It is one which will easily account for your being in the company of an Asiatic gentleman, and which you will have no difficulty in sustaining."

It was, indeed, a simple and excellent plan for avoiding undue curiosity. I said so, and then: "Now perhaps you will tell me where we are going. I have my ideas. . . ."

"We are going west," he answered gravely. "To Cornwall."

My heart beat fast. It was what I wanted him to say. "To the home of Helzephron?"

"Yes. For it is there we shall be in the very center of the web. In those far western solitudes, despite the recent opening up of the Duchy to tourists, there are still vast spaces of lonely moorland and unvisited coast where one may walk for half a day and meet no living soul. There is a great Hinterland between the little town of St. Ives and the Land's End that for all practical purposes is unknown and unexplored.

Later on, I will show you certain maps. . . . It is in one of the remotest spots of all that Major Helzephron has his house. I tell you, Sir John," he continued, with a sort of passion, "that in those lost and forgotten solitudes, where England stretches out her granite foot to spurn the Atlantic, strange secrets lie hid today! On those gray and lonely moors, where the last Druids practised their mysterious rites, and which are still covered with sinister memorials of the past, lies the explanation of the terror which is troubling the world! There, and there only, shall we discover the secrets of the air, and—if human skill and determination are of any avail—Miss Constance Shepherd!"

An obsequious waiter came with iced *consommé*. He was followed by the great Nicholas himself, bulging out of his buttoned frock-coat—Nicholas never wore evening dress—who bowed low and had a whispered confabulation with Danjuro.

I remarked on this unusual honor. "I do what I wish here," the Japanese replied. "It is, of course, through Mr. Van Adams. I hold this place in the hollow of my hand—as you will presently see!"

He gave one of his rare and weary smiles, and then said quietly: "Please do not get up or move. Major Helzephron has just come into the gallery!"

I could not have moved. His words turned me to stone.

"I felt sure," he went on, "that for a day or two Helzephron would show himself in London. Knowing what we know—or at least suspect—such a move was a certainty. He is in the habit of coming here. He booked his usual seat at this restaurant, and his usual box at the Parthenon Theatre—and for reasons obvious to you and me, if to no one else in the world! I confess to an anxiety to look upon this man."

"You have had this corner darkened?" I said quickly. "No one can see *us* here?"

"Not clearly. And Helzephron would not know who we are if he did see us. But, as he is sure to come upon us in Cornwall, it is better to take no risks. To that end I have had a little device arranged for us which proved of great service to me once in Chicago."

He bent forward to the mass of ferns and flowers in the center of the table, disarranging the greenery at its base. At once a green-painted tube became visible, and then a slanting mirror, the size of a postcard.

"What on earth is that?" I whispered.

"An adaptation of the periscope!" he replied, taking a magnifying glass from his pocket, adjusting it, and bending over the mirror. "The lens is focused upon Helzephron's table. With this magnifier I enlarge the image in the mirror. Ah! So that is the honorable gentleman!"

A faint hissing noise came from him. His face stiffened into fixed and horrible intentness as he stared through his magnifier at the little oblong of mirror.

"Shi-ban, Go-ban, hei!" he muttered. "There are two, then. I expect the younger man is the Honorable Herbert Gascoigne, of whom we have heard!"

The hissing noise continued, the ecstasy of attention did not relax for two or three minutes.

At last Danjuro looked up. His face, which had seemed carved out of jade, relaxed.

"Will you take my seat?" he said politely, handing me his reading-glass. "A little drama will commence in a few minutes. It will interest you!"

I gave him a glance of interrogation as we exchanged chairs.

"We shall be in Cornwall to-morrow, and in advance of our friends," he whispered. "But, in order that we may carry out our preliminary inquiries quite undisturbed, I have thought out a little plan by which, if all goes well, Major Helzephron will be detained in London for a day or two—you will see."

Trembling with eagerness I stared down at the mirror.

The periscope was perfectly focused. The addition of the reading-glass made everything perfectly clear.

Two men in evening clothes were seated at a table.

Their heads were close together, and they were talking earnestly. One was a tall, handsome boy of two-and-twenty, with a fair complexion and a reckless, dissipated cast of face. Young as he was, evil experience had marked him, and his smile was that of a much older man.

But I scarcely cast a glance on him as I stared at the colored, moving miniature of "Hawk Helzephron." The man's face was deeply tanned; above the brows a magnificent dome of white forehead went up to a thatch of dark red hair—the forehead of a thinker if ever I saw one. The face below was seamed and lined everywhere. The thin nose curved out and down like that of a bird of prey. The mouth was large, well-shaped, but compressed, the chin a wedge of resolution. And, as he talked, I saw a pair of slightly protruding eyes, cold and fierce. The whole aspect of the man was ferocious and formidable to a degree.

"Watch!" whispered Danjuro.

I watched, and this is what I saw.

Into the picture came a thick-set, brutal-looking man, with a blazing diamond in his shirt-front. He was passing Helzephron's table when his dinner jacket caught a wine-glass and swept it to the floor.

The hawk-faced man looked up with a scowl and said something just as the portly Nicholas and a waiter

appeared in the background, as if passing casually by.

The thick-set man bent down till his face was close to Helzephron's. He said something also, with an unpleasant smile.

Instantly Helzephron leapt up and drove his fist full into the other's face.

The fight that followed ended very speedily. The thick-set man took the blow calmly. Then, without heat, and in a fashion which instantly told me the truth of the matter, he set about Helzephron, hitting him where and when he chose, until a shouting crowd of guests and waiters separated the combatants and a policeman and commissionaire hurried them away from the gallery.

During all the tumult Mr. Danjuro sat quietly smoking a cigarette.

"That was Mr. Wag Ashton, the pugilist," he remarked. "Honorable Nicholas and the waiter saw that the honorable Helzephron struck him first. I think the Major will be resting for a day or two before Mr. Ashton summonses him for assault."

I felt faint with surprise and amazement.

"So you, you arranged . . ."

He interrupted me. "Now let us finish our dinner in peace," he said. "Some river trout, *meunier,* are coming."

An hour afterwards, with myself at the wheel, a

huge sixty horse-power Limousine, loaded with luggage and with Messrs. Danjuro and Thumbwood inside, was rolling down the Piccadilly slope.

To Penzance.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HUNTING INSTINCT IS STIMULATED BY A PROCESSION

THE big car rolled down Piccadilly. She was a beauty to handle, as I discovered in the first two minutes. The very latest type of electric starter, a magnificent lighting installation—every convenience was ready to my hand. I was in an extraordinary state of mind as I steered the car through the late theater and restaurant traffic, purely mechanically and without conscious thought about it.

The predominant sensation was one of immense overwhelming relief at the prospect of *action*. Mere office activities, the planning of guard and patrol ships, conferences with pilots and officials, had been quite powerless to calm the terrible fever of unrest within me. It was commanding other people to do things, not doing them myself. I knew all the time that I should have been happier piloting one of the war-planes over the Atlantic. Now, at any rate, I was doing something real. I was actually setting out, in my own person, upon a definite quest. It might be all

moonshine. I was well aware that many hard-headed people would have laughed at this expedition, considering the slender evidence I had. They would have talked about "circumstantial evidence," the folly of pure assumption, and so forth. "Behold this dreamer cometh!" would have been their attitude.

And although I was driving the big car up Park Lane for Oxford Street and the road to the West, I did feel as if I were in a dream. My whole life had been altered by the events of the past few days, ruined for ever it might be. To-night its stream was violently diverted from its course. Everything with which I was familiar had flashed away, and I was on the brink of the fantastic and unknown. There was not a man in London setting out upon so strange an errand, under circumstances so unprecedented, as I was this night. We slid by a huge white house, set back from the railings, and with all its windows looking out over the Park. It was the London palace that Mr. Van Adams had built for himself during the last five years, and the strangeness of my affair was intensified at the sight.

Only a few hours ago the great man had been sitting in my chambers, and introducing the enigmatic figure that sat behind me in the car. Here was a dream figure indeed! It was impossible to think of Danjuro as a human being. He was just a brain, a specialized force, devoted to one object, and probably, as Van

Adams had hinted, the supreme force of its kind in existence. Already I had placed myself in his hands, and not only my personal interests, dear as those were to me, but my responsibilities to the State as well, and that was no small thing for him to have achieved in so short a space of time. The unique detachment and concentration that was sitting behind me had an almost magical effect upon one's mind and will. With such help, surely, I could not fail?

I fell to thinking of what the Japanese had already achieved, the quiet and masterly skill of his analysis, the cold audacity of his plot to keep Helzephron in London, the neatness and finish of his operations as witnessed by the periscope upon the dinner-table at the "Mille Colonnes." Surely, Helzephron, or whoever was the master-criminal, was a doomed man with Danjuro on his track?

We were running out of Ealing now, and traffic was almost gone in the long, straight westward road among the acres of market gardens and glass-houses that fringe the western approach to the metropolis. I let out the powerful engines, and as the car leapt like a spurred horse, my heart leapt up into anger at the name Helzephron.

Connie—poor, lost Connie—had told me herself how the man had pestered her, and I had seen him at Paddington with my own eyes. The investigations at the Parthenon Theatre by Thumbwood and Danjuro had

put the details in the picture, and an ugly one it was. The man, V.C. as he was, had a bad reputation enough. I had watched him that very evening, marked every line upon the hawk-like, cruel face, and thrilled when the vulgar pugilist attacked him. It was the next best thing to thrashing him myself! Yet—I record this as an interesting point of my psychology at the beginning of the enterprise—I was disgusted with and loathed the man only. I did not hate him, for I found it, even now, impossible to believe that he was the abductor of my girl.

Understand me if you can. Danjuro had convinced my intellect, but not my heart. My state was the reverse of the ordinary state in such a situation. Plenty of people believe in anything—a religion for example—by faith, and cannot justify their faith intellectually. Their belief is always confident and strong. I believed intellectually, but had no faith, which was why this quest seemed shadow-like and a thing in a dream. No doubt, the long night drive and my curious companion—I was always conscious of him—intensified the impression of unreality.

About three in the morning Danjuro spoke through the tube and insisted on relieving me. I stopped the huge car in a dark, tree-bordered road, where the moonlight lay in pools and patches of silver, and exchanged seats with the little man. As I stood on the road and stamped with my feet to restore the circu-

lation, the night-breeze rustled in the leaves, and far away I heard the nightjar spinning. Never was such a still and solitary place. Danjuro's face in the moonlight seemed as immobile and lifeless as one of those Japanese masks of wax with eyes of opalescent glass that you can buy in the Oriental shops.

I got inside and, suddenly weary, sank back in the luxuriously cushioned seat. The car started again, and Thumbwood switched on a light in the roof. He produced a Thermos flask of hot soup, which I found delicious and refreshing.

"How have you been getting on with Mr. Danjuro?" I inquired.

"Very well, thank you, Sir John. He knows everything, I do believe. If there's one thing where I should detect a man who was talking through 'is 'at, it's 'osses. Stands to reason. But this gentleman knows 'osses like a blooming trainer, sir. And as for the games of the crooks in the ring and on the course, he's wide to every one of 'em. I generally carries a pack of cards in my pocket, sir, and I've got one with me now. The things 'e showed me passes belief. I've seen a good deal of that sort of work, but Mr. Danjuro's an easy winner. I wouldn't play poker with 'im no, nor 'alfpenny nap, for a fistful o' thick 'uns!"

We breakfasted at Exeter, and I had the opportunity of a shave and a bath. I remember that when I was

half-way up the hotel stairs a horrid thought struck me, and I hurried down again to consult Danjuro.

How would the stuff he had put on my skin stand hot water and soap?

He reassured me, however. Nothing would remove the beastly stuff but a preparation he carried with him, and I bathed in peace.

It was a beautiful morning when we started again, and for many miles our route lay close to the smiling Devon sea. The waves were sapphire blue, framed in the red sandstone rocks, and the sky resembled a great hollow turquoise. It was a bright morning, and one side of me rejoiced in it; but the thought of my girl was always there, a constant sullen pain, for which the morning held no anodyne.

Thumbwood drove on this stretch of the journey, and Danjuro sat inside studying innumerable maps, and now and then making notes in a pocket-book. I wondered what thoughts were seething and bubbling behind that massive dome of skull.

Apart from the scenery, there was plenty to interest a Commissioner of Air Police. The sky was speckled with small private planes, converging upon Plymouth or Exeter from many a pleasant country residence. There was no longer any need for the professional man or the prosperous tradesman to live within a very few miles of his place of business. Men flew to their day's work, and from considerable dis-

tances, and as a matter of course. A mile or two out at sea one distinguished the large steady-going passenger airships by which England was now ringed, and occasionally the Royal Mail boats cut the sky like javelins. More than once I spotted one of my police patrols. It was curious to remember that I, who sat here with a stained face and shaven lip, bowling along the Devon roads at a miserable forty miles an hour, had supreme control of all those aerial argosies.

There were few cars upon the roads at this early hour. Contrary to general opinion fifteen years ago, the popularity of flying had by no means killed the automobile. It had lessened their numbers in an appreciable degree, and made the roads more pleasant. I should, of course, have preferred to reach our destination, or, at any rate, to have traveled the greater part of the way towards it by airship. The system of registration and the police regulations—framed by myself—would have given too much away. My actual identity and purpose might not have been discovered, but we should have been easily traced, and Helzephron—if he was what we suspected—would be the first to hear of a private aeroplane making its appearance in the solitudes where he lived.

Towards midday we were approaching Plymouth, when I began to feel uneasy. The agony I had endured there a day or two ago, when Thumbwood burst into my bedroom with news of the *Atlantis* disaster,

clouded my memory. I felt that I never wished to see the pride of Devon again. This, though, was merely weakness which I crushed down. More practical considerations occurred to me. I made Charles stop the car and got inside with Danjuro.

"Look here," I said, "hadn't we better run straight through the town and get on into Cornwall? We can lunch at St. Germans or somewhere."

"You have some special reason for avoiding Plymouth, Sir John?" Danjuro asked politely.

"Well, it's the air-port for America. One of my largest stations is there. Dozens and dozens of people know me. I've always been a familiar figure in Plymouth, and never more so than lately, of course."

The Japanese gave his little weary smile. "I do not think you realize the alteration in your appearance," he said. "I assure you, and I am an expert in these matters, that no one at all would ever recognize you. I had proposed to stop in Plymouth for at least a couple of hours."

"Why, exactly?"

"For several reasons. One is that I shall be able to purchase some local Cornish maps and a directory or two, which I need, and found no opportunity of procuring in London. But that is not all. Here we are in the very center of air matters, as far as the Atlantic is concerned. The place is still seething with excitement. Nothing else but the piracies is spoken

of. The town is packed with correspondents of the principal European newspapers. It is in a ferment. I much wish to go about with my ears open for an hour or two. I do think, Sir John, that it would be unwise to neglect this opportunity, for you as well as myself. There is no knowing what we may pick up."

"You're certain about my disguise?"

"Perfectly certain. You will not, of course, enter into long conversations with anyone who knows you well, as your voice would betray you. Otherwise you may rest secure."

"Yes, that's the weak point," I replied. "I've always heard that, however perfectly a man may be disguised, you cannot disguise his voice."

He rolled a cigarette with the quick snatching movement of his fingers that always struck me as a miracle of dexterity.

"It is not true," he remarked. "I have invented five methods, three mechanical and two medical or chemical, whichever you like to call them. When we have leisure I will show you. But there is no need for anything of the sort in your case. It will give you confidence, Sir John, to test the completeness of your new appearance. If you will go to the Royal Hotel and lunch there—keeping awake to hear the general talk—I will join you about three."

"Very well," I replied, though with some reluctance, "and the car?"

"Mr. Thumbwood has been with you at the 'Royal,' and he is not disguised. It would be better that he should not approach the hotel. We will put you down a short distance away. I will remain in the car and direct Thumbwood where to go."

Nothing escaped this little man! He seemed to foresee and provide for everything, and when I alighted five minutes afterwards, some two hundred yards from the hotel, I felt fairly secure in my new character as Mr. Johns, the don of Christ Church, Oxford.

Immediately I was in the street I became aware—you know how one does?—that the Japanese was right, and Plymouth was in a ferment. London is too vast for anything but a national calamity to make any alteration in the outward appearance of things, and even then it takes a sharp eye and a man well versed in the psychology of crowds to detect anything unusual. Not so a big provincial town.

As I walked along the classic façade of the theater and turned the corner to the main entrance of the hotel, I saw one thought on every face and heard one single topic of discussion. The streets, always so gay and cheerful with military and naval uniforms, seemed more crowded than their wont, and there was a definite electricity in the air. I know that I felt stimulated, encouraged to persist, and as I ascended the massive steps of the hotel, my clean-shaven lips smiled to think with what interest I should be regarded if anyone

had but an inkling of whom I was and upon what mission.

And then I had a shock.

Standing in the big lounge-hall, and talking to a man in a black morning-coat and a silk hat, was my second in command—Muir Lockhart, Assistant Commissioner of Air Police! He was in uniform, a special uniform that we both wore upon ceremonial occasions only.

"Yes," he was saying, "I'm down here representing the Chief."

I dared not stay to listen, but I walked towards them as slowly as I could. Muir Lockhart has a somewhat high, penetrating voice.

"When did you come down?" asked the other man.

"Arrived half an hour ago, flew down from Whitehall this morning," said Muir Lockhart.

"Then Sir John Custance isn't coming?"

My assistant shook his head. "Utterly impossible," he said. "Sir John cannot leave town just now. He must be at the head of things; can't possibly be spared. I saw him this morning before I left; he had been working all night and was nearly dead. 'Explain my position to them,' he said; 'nothing but strict duty would keep me away from Plymouth to-day.' So, you see how it is, Mr. Mayor?"

"Oh, quite, quite! Well, I must be getting round

to the Guildhall. You will march up your men at half-past one? Thank you."

The man in the silk hat, who I realized must be the Mayor of Plymouth, hurried away. I was left face to face with Muir Lockhart.

He stared at me, not offensively, but in such a way that he could not have missed a detail of my appearance; he always was an observant beggar. Then he passed by without a sign of recognition. Good! I reflected, if my own colleague, who saw me for several hours each day, did not know me, no one else would. It seemed a good omen, and I blessed Danjuro in my heart.

And what a splendid liar Muir Lockhart was! He knew that I had gone away on my own, and he hadn't the least idea in the world where I was! It was a temptation to discover myself, but I refrained.

I was very puzzled. What on earth was he doing here in uniform, and talking to the Mayor about? I hadn't a suspicion of the truth even then, and I had a curious sense of being out of things, forgotten and on the scrap-heap! The long drive had made me hungry and I thought about lunch. Before going into the coffee-room I wished to remove the stains of travel, so I went down the corridor to the lavatory.

When I entered a man in his shirt-sleeves was bending over one of the basins and sluicing himself with many splashes. As I was washing my own swarthy

hands he emerged from a towel and gave me a casual glance.

It was Mr. Van Adams!

I could not repress a violent start, the thing was so sudden. What did this gathering of the clans mean? He noticed my movement at once, and looked at me with inquiry in his eyes. The lavatory was quite empty save for our two selves, and my decision was taken at once.

"Mr. Van Adams?" I asked.

"Sure!" he replied. "You have the floor—shoot!"

"You don't know me?"

"Not from the great Lum-tum, though your voice is kind of homey."

"I'm Sir John Custance. Danjuro's been faking me up. He's down here with me."

"Gee!" said Mr. Van Adams. "Aren't you the fresh thing now, Sir John? So you're down for the obsequies incog.? That's what I've come for—matter of respect. Flew down from Park Lane after breakfast."

"I'm on my way west. We only stopped here for an hour or two, as Danjuro had some business."

"I've ordered lunch in a private room overlooking the square. Some right up, Sir John, you'll be able to see everything from there."

"Thank you. But I'm still in the dark. I'm right away from the office now, as you know. I saw Com-

mander Muir Lockhart here just now, but I couldn't speak to him. . . ."

He took me by the arm and led me along the corridor to the lift. "Captain Lashmar, of your force and the five men of the patrol boat are being buried today," he said; "also Captain Swainson, of the *Atlantis,* and the boys murdered on *his* ship."

I flushed under my dye. I had never heard a word of it. I felt an absolute beast as we entered the private room, and I tried to explain to the millionaire.

"Think you callous and unfeeling?" he said in answer. "Guess I know better than that, my friend. You're out to prevent just such a spectacle as we're going to witness from ever happening again. You're playing a better game than prancing along at the head of a procession. You're getting busy at the heart of things. Now sit down and share the pork bosom and beans, or whatever they've given us. And tell me all about it."

We sat down to lunch, and after a glass of Burgundy, I told Van Adams of all that had occurred, and also expressed my complete confidence in Danjuro.

"You're right," he said. "There isn't an investigator on the globe that'd carry a tune to him. He has his orders to stick to you right through and he'll carry them out. That little man's got a brain like the Mammoth Cave, and he's without human passions, save only one—he'd go to hell in a paper suit for me!

See here——" and the millionaire told me a string of anecdotes about the uncanny little Jap that would make the fortunes of a writer of Romance.

He was still on the same subject when he stopped in the middle of a sentence.

The noise in the square outside was suddenly hushed, and we heard a muffled chord of music. Rising from our chairs we went to the windows. Everywhere, as far as eye could reach, was a black sea of heads, from among which the slender clock-tower on its island in the center rose like a sentinel.

The pavements were lined by troops, soldiers and sailors in equal proportions, and there was a flutter as of falling leaves as every head was bared and the piercing sweetness of Chopin's "Funeral March" filled all the air.

Then they came, following the band: thirteen coffins covered with flowers, thirteen brave heroes, who would never slant down the long reaches of the upper air again.

After the hearses walked Paget and Fowles, the two heroic airmen who had called the rescuing ship by wireless, and then came the chaplains and Muir Lockhart.

For my part I saw the whole procession in a dream. The head of the Transatlantic Air Line, the Mayor and Corporation in their robes—the stately funereal pomp of it all seemed unsubstantial and unreal.

Mr. Van Adams was kneeling a yard or two away from the window. His head was bent, he had a crucifix and a string of golden beads in his hands, and was saying prayers. Who would have thought it of this master of millions with the pike-like jaw? I suppose he was a Catholic.

But my mind was far away, above the heaving wastes of the Atlantic, and I saw an unnamed, unknown ship rushing through the air, at a speed undreamed of hitherto in the history of flight. And in the pilot's seat I had a vision of a hawk-faced man with cruel eyes and a smile upon his hard, thin lips. . . .

I stood there for so long that the very tail of the procession was passing by, and Mr. Van Adams rose from his prayers with the sign of the Cross, and touched me on the arm.

"Look!" he said, pointing down into the street.

I followed his finger and saw Danjuro standing on the opposite curb. He was looking after the cortège, and his face, with the expression on it, was quite clear to see. . . .

In an instant I came out of my dream.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN WITH THE WICKED FACE

ON the morning after our arrival I stepped out of my bedroom window at Penzance and stood upon the balcony.

Many times had I flown over Cornwall; never had I set foot in the Duchy until now. Plymouth had always been my furthest west.

The sea was blue as the Mediterranean, the sky a huge hollow turquoise, the air all Arabia. Away in the bay St. Michael's Mount, crowned with towers, gleamed like a vision of the New Jerusalem in some old monkish missal—and the heart within me was so hard, stern, and full of deadly purpose that no summer seas nor balmy western winds could touch the rigor of my mood.

For we were on the battlefield now. There was no more vagueness nor speculation. I, in the place I occupied, owed a debt to society, and to myself a personal and bitter revenge. And those debts should be paid.

Danjuro knocked and entered the bedroom. Yesterday afternoon, within half an hour of our arrival

at Penzance, he had disappeared, telling me not to wait up for him, as he could not say what time he would return. I accordingly went to bed early, for I was tired out, and had not seen him until now.

"I have been very busy, Sir John," he said. "In the characters of a mining engineer at one place and agent for a foreign shipping firm at another, I have been making some very necessary inquiries. I engaged a local motor—our own would hardly have suited the part—and I have covered a great deal of country."

"And your exact object?"

"I have two. One is to discover any private engineering works where special engines could have been made in secret. You will remember that we both came to the conclusion that the Air Pirate could have obtained silent engines in no other way. The other is —petrol."

"Petrol! I never thought of that! I see what you mean."

"Precisely, Sir John. An airship such as the one we are after must have a constant supply of petrol, and, of course, consumes enormous quantities. When I can connect a certain private individual with the receipt of such quantities, we are another step forward."

"How have you got on?" I asked eagerly.

"I have nothing definite. But there are certain indications—slight, oh, very slight!—which I am following up. I will go into everything with you this

evening. Meanwhile you have your own day mapped out."

"Yes. I have studied the local maps and asked a good many questions. After breakfast I shall walk over the moors to this little lonely village of Zerran. It is about eight miles away from here, and, I understand, not more than one and a half from Tregeraint Sea House, which is the home of Major Helzephron. There is a fair-sized old-fashioned inn on the cliffs where we shall probably be able to get rooms."

"And settle down to our reading party," he replied, with a sudden gleam in his narrow eyes. "I have the Greek texts of Plato's 'Republic' and the 'Meno' in my portmanteau; it is wise to pay attention to details! We shall, then, meet at dinner this evening, and I expect that your news will be of great importance. With your permission, I shall take honorable Thumbwood with me. He will be useful."

After breakfast, with some sandwiches and a flask, I set out, passing down the main street of the far western town, and by the last station in England, till I found myself mounting a winding road which led upwards through a suburb towards the moorlands.

The air was heavy with the perfume of innumerable flowers. Tall palm-trees grew in the gardens of old granite houses, a sub-tropical flora flourished everywhere, and it was difficult to believe that one was in England. The hedges were luxuriant with ferns that

grow in hot-houses elsewhere, Royal Osmunda and Maidenhair, and every moment the road grew steeper.

If you look at the map of Cornwall you will see that the extremity of the county forms a sort of peninsula. Penzance is on the south, and faces the English Channel on the south. My back was now turned to this, and I was walking due north, towards my objective, the vast and little known "Hinterland" of mountainous moor and savage coast which lies between the Channel and the Atlantic.

As I went, the warmth and color, the riot of Nature all round, seemed as unreal as a dream. It brought no ease or healing to my soul. Deep, deep down, though controlled and prisoned by the will, an unending agony was lying. I'm not going to insist upon this, or often obtrude it in my story. But you must not think that, until the very end, I knew a moment's peace. My dear love and her awful fate were ever before me, and all the sights and sounds of Nature in this western paradise breathed nothing but her name.

. . . At last the habitations of man grew fewer. Gardens gave place to sloping fields enclosed by "hedges" of stone, and at length a long, level sky-line above and in front showed me that the moors were close.

I reached the top at last, and took in a great breath of the sweetest, most exhilarating air that I have ever known. The unfenced road stretched away ahead of

me for miles, a long, white ribbon laid upon the heath and yellow gorse. I was on a vast plateau of gold and brown and purple. To the left great hills crowned with rock granite tors cut into the sky, and to the right was the jagged summit of Carne Zerran, three miles away as the crow flies. At its foot, on the edge of mighty cliffs that fell away a sheer three hundred feet to the ocean, I knew lay the little village that I sought.

I looked at my map for a moment, took out my pocket compass, and then plunged into the heather. Already I had a good idea of the lie of the country—it is an instinct with your flying man—and I realized that an accurate knowledge of it would prove invaluable in the task before me.

I met no living soul during that first walk over the moor. Larks were singing high above in the blue; a pair of the rare Cornish choughs, with their scarlet bills, flew screeching from the summit of a lichen-covered rock as big as a house; but until I got to Carne Zerran, and looked down to the narrow strip of pasture lands and cornfields that lie along the cliffs, there was no sign of human habitation.

Far down below I saw a church tower and a little cluster of gray houses. Beyond was the coast-line, with a creamy froth of breakers at the foot of the jagged cliffs, and the Atlantic, "Mother of Oceans," beyond. There was no land between me and New

York! I suppose that in all the glory of sun and color, superb spaces of sea and sky, I stood alone, and looked upon a scene as fair as any on this earth. But as I focused my binoculars, and swept the coast, my only thought was that here—if anywhere at all—was the heart of the mystery I had come to solve.

Well! It was a fitting setting, in its lonely vastness. Anything might happen here among these Druid-haunted hills. A crafty fiend, a man with a great intellect and Satan in his soul, might well find this his proper theater!

About a mile from the village, and just below me, I saw the cliffs bent inwards between two projecting headlands. This must be the Zerran Cove of the map, and—yes, seemingly upon the very edge of the precipice was a long, gray building, which could be none other than "The Miners' Arms."

I began the descent, leaping from rock to rock, where the adders lay basking in the sun. After a few hundred yards, I struck a gorge, through which a stream fell towards the sea. Here I found a well-defined path, which looped downwards to the ruins of a deserted tin-mine. I saw, as I passed it, the windowless engine-house, and the gaunt timbers of the winding gear still in place. The gibbet-like erection and the dumps of useless stuff covered with rank dock leaves made a forlorn and ugly picture in that narrow gorge where the sun hardly penetrated.

I passed it soon, and came out upon the main coach road from St. Ives to Land's End, and, crossing this, found a side lane, which took me direct to the remote hostelry I had seen from the heights above.

It was a large place, covered with ivy, and no doubt did a considerable trade eighty years before, when the innumerable tin-mines on the moor were all at work. Now it seemed forgotten by the world, and all asleep in the sun. "An ideal base for our operations!" I thought, as I strode through an open door into a long, low room, with a stone floor and heavily timbered roof.

It was cool, and so dark after the blazing sunshine that, for a moment, I could see nothing, though I heard a sound of stertorous breathing. When my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw that there was a man asleep by the little counter. He sat on a bench which ran along the wall, and his head was buried in his arms, which rested on a beer-stained table. By his side stood a bottle half full of whisky.

Supposing him to be the landlord—and no engaging figure at that—I touched him on the shoulder. It was like springing a trap! Instantly he snatched away his arms and sat up. For a second sleep held him. Then it passed away like a breath on glass, and if ever I saw fear on a man's face I saw it then.

He was dressed in a blue jersey and an alpaca coat, oil-stained and dirty. His hands were the hands of a mechanic, with grimy nails. But it was his face that

held me. It was sleek and cunning. There was a curious mixture of refinement and wickedness. He seemed like a naturally sensitive man, whom circumstances, indulgence, or some special temptation, had led very deeply astray.

I noted all this while he stared at me with a drooping jaw and bloodshot eyes. His skin had turned dead-white, like the belly of a fish, and whatever he was thinking I felt that I would not have that man's conscience for a million.

"I want you," I said—they were the first words that came.

He made an inarticulate noise.

"You are the landlord, aren't you?"

At that he gave a long breath and his rigidity relaxed. He snatched at the whisky bottle, poured some into a glass and drank it off neat.

"Lord, how you startled me!" he said glibly. "I was far away—dreaming—and you frightened me out of my life!"

It was my turn to be amazed, though I showed nothing. The fellow spoke with a cultivated voice and accent which were impossible to mistake. He was not what I had thought him.

"I am very sorry," I said; "you must please excuse me. But I naturally thought . . ."

"Of course you did!" he said, and a civil but ugly smile came on his clever, unpleasant face. "As a

matter of fact, Trewhella, the landlord, has just gone to the village for a few minutes. He asked me to keep house for him. He's almost due back now."

Thanking him urbanely, I sat down, my mind working very quickly. He offered me some whisky, and though it was the last thing I wanted, I accepted after a show of reluctance. He was watching me out of the corners of his eyes the whole time.

"Can you tell me," I said, with great openness of manner, "if I can get rooms here, or in Zerran village?"

He became alert at once. "Rooms, to stay in, do you mean?"

"Yes. I am an Oxford tutor, and I have a young foreign gentleman in my charge whom I am coaching. I want a quiet place for three or four weeks, and this seems ideal for the purpose."

His face cleared. "I should imagine so," he replied. "I know Trewhella does let sometimes."

"You live here?" I remarked, with polite indifference.

"I have been here for a year," he answered. "I am, as a matter of fact, a mining engineer—hence these clothes! I belong to a little private syndicate of friends who are opening up a disused tin-mine, on the moor not far away. Ah, here is the landlord! Trewhella, this gentleman wishes to speak to you." And then to me: "Good-morning, sir. No doubt, if

you come here, I and my friends will see something of you. We are mostly public-school and University men ourselves, and we often look in here of an evening after our day's work."

He waved his hand and went out into the sunshine.

CHAPTER X

SIR JOHN CUSTANCE COMES UPON THE HOUSE OF HELZEPHRON

MR. TREWHELLA was an elderly Cornishman, with welcoming manners, the native shrewdness of his race, but without guile. We got on famously from the word "go." He had three bedrooms and a large sitting-room to let. His wife, who had driven into St. Ives, was, he asserted, a good cook. As for Thumbwood, he could wait on us and live with the landlord and his wife. Finally, there was an empty barn which would hold our car very comfortably.

"And what would you be thinking of paying, zur?" asked Mr. Trewhella.

"I shall leave that to you. I may tell you that the gentleman I am preparing for his Oxford examination is wealthy. He is a Japanese nobleman, and as long as you make us comfortable . . ."

This had the desired effect. The landlord became expansive in his slow way, and showed me all over the premises of his quaint and rambling dwelling. It was a wild and fantastic spot, an ancient haunt of

smugglers and wreckers, I learnt. The back-yard opened straight into the short pneumatic turf above the cliffs, the brink of which was not more than two hundred yards away. Here the stream, which flowed past the inn, descended in a series of miniature cataracts to a tiny cove of deep-green water, almost enclosed by two towering precipices, crowned with jagged spires and pinnacles of rock. There was a little scimitar of golden sand far down at the water's edge, and the scene was one of savage grandeur that I have rarely known surpassed in all my travels.

As he stood on the height and looked down, I saw something which seemed strangely out of place. A line of street rails, with wooden rollers at intervals between them, fell at a dizzy angle from a spot some ten yards away on the turf, ending abruptly on the level, and in front of a smallish hut of corrugated iron.

"What is the rail for?" I asked. "Surely you don't haul the boats"—there were two of them lying on the beach—"right up to the top of the cliff! It must be two hundred and fifty feet!"

"Nigher three hundred, zur. No. Them rails belong to bring up machinery and stores for Tregeraint Mine by Carne Zerran. They do come by sea in a lil' steamboat. 'Tes more convenient so. There be a lil' oil engine in that shed to haul 'em up in trucks. I let the land, for 'tes all mine down-along, and they do pay me ten pound a year."

We strolled back to the house, Mr. Trewhella proposing a Cornish pasty and beer for lunch.

"Now you mention it, that gentleman who was keeping house for you just now said that he was a mining engineer."

The landlord's big, weather-beaten face wrinkled like a stained window. He began to heave and chuckle, finally exploding in a bellow of laughter.

"Mr. Vargus!" he spluttered, "Mr. Vargus! He *thinks* he be a mining engineer, but a knows no more about it than my pig! He be a clever gentleman, sure 'nuf. He do have some braäve knowledge to machinery, I'll allow. But mining, and tin-mining!"

Mr. Trewhella could find no further words to express his contempt for the mining attainments of my friend with the refined and evil face.

"You see," the landlord continued, as we ate our pasties, "I'm an old mine-captain myself, bred and born to it. 'Tedn't likely as I could be deceived. When I heered that a gentleman had come into Tregeraint Manor and the old mine, and proposed to work it, I laughed, I did. I know every inch of Wheal Tregeraint, and fifty years ago it was a fine property. To-day them amatoors up along'll never get enough tin out to oxidize, let alone smelt."

"Who are they, then, Mr. Trewhella?"

"That's what lots of folk asked when they first come here in twos and threes. They're gentlemen, zur,

like yourself, that's what they are. Never was such a thing known in these parts, though folk are used to 'em now. There's Mr. Helzephron, a Cornishman himself, and should know better, Mr. Vargus, you seed, Mr. Gascoigne, a mad young devil if you like, and near a dozen more. They all live together in the greät house on the cliff and work the mine theyselves. Never no one else allowed. They cooks and does for themselves, just as if they was in a mining camp in California."

"No women, servants or anything?"

"Never an apron. My missus belong to say they lives like Popish monks, which she see when traveling with a lady among the Eyetalians. 'Not so, my tender dear,' says I. 'I never heered that Popish monks spent most of their evenings in the village inn with a bottle of Scotch whisky afore each man, and precious little left by closing time!' "

"A hard-drinking lot then?"

"Wonderful at their liquor. I tell you, zur, it's good for me! Now I've got used to them and their funny ways, I wish they'd stay for ever. Speaking from a strictly business point of view, that is. But soon they'll find out they've lost their money and they'll jack it up. 'Tes not in reason as they can go on, though they do seem so full of hope and certainty, as you mind to up! But I *know*."

He was obviously pleased with my interest in his

talk. I wondered what he would have said if he had known who I was and why I was there? Under a calm exterior, a professor munching potato pasty! I was filled with a furious excitement. The man's gossip was worth a sovereign a word. Here was, moment by moment, what looked like complete confirmation of our suspicions. And yet, even as I realized this, I realized also how infernally clever the scheme was. Without the clue which Danjuro and myself alone possessed, there was nothing in the world to connect Helzephron and Tregeraint with the business that was ruffling the calm of two continents.

It was not my game to ask more direct questions than I could help. It was better to let the racy stream flow on, with a word of comment now and then. I ventured a calculated one now.

"Fools and their money are soon parted," said I.

"You may say that, zur! And they've poured out money like water. Electric light, oal sorts o' cases full of new-fangled machinery, and that mystery made about the silly old mine you'd think it was a seam of diamonds."

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, Mr. Trewhella!" I rose from the table as I spoke. "But what you say about a dozen or more gentlemen drinking nearly a bottle of whisky each rather surprises me. I'm no foe to honest enjoyment, but . . ."

I put on a slight primness of manner, as became the character I sustained.

The landlord nodded vigorously. "'Tes so!" he agreed, "and most onusual. They be gentlefolk, sure 'nuff, but shall I tell 'ee what I think?"

"What's that?"

"I think as most of 'em's dropped out, so to speak. I shouldn't be frightened if as their families didn't have anything to say to 'em, and they've nowhere much else to go. Mr. Helzephron knows what he's about, he do. I judge by a kind o' reckless way they have, 'specially the younger gentlemen. They don't seem to mind about ordinary things same as most. Well, I suppose this fool tin-mining keeps 'em out of mischief."

I wondered.

When I set out upon the return journey I took another route. I found from the landlord that by skirting the coast for a mile in the direction of St. Ives I could come upon a moorland path that would take me to the little railway-station of St. Erth. I could then catch a train for Penzance. My ostensible reason was to vary my walk, my real one that by this change of plan I should pass by and have a view of Tregeraint Mine and the Manor House.

"Not that you'll see much or get close," said Mr. Trewhella.

"How is that?" I asked.

"I told you that Mr. Helzephron"—apparently the hawk-faced man had dropped his military title in Cornwall—"do make a mystery of his peddling mine. He goes further than that. The mine buildings and the house are surrounded by two fences of barbed-wire and the Manor by a high wall. 'Trespassers,' notice boards belong to say, 'will be prosecuted with the utmost rigor of the law'!"

"Well, I shan't attempt to trespass, Mr. Trewhella!"

The landlord laughed. "Mine prospectin's not in the way of a larned gentleman like yourself. Maybe it's as well. Mr. Helzephron has got two dogs he turns out at night, and terrible ugly customers they be. Mr. Vargus do tell me that they be Tibetan mastiffs, which am the largest dogs in the world. They look like a sour-faced Newfoundland with heavy ears, only bigger."

I tramped away from "The Miners' Arms." Although I recognized the fact that we were only at the fringe of discovery, my mind was made up. Thick darkness surrounded me, but I was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that Major Helzephron, and no other, was the man for whom the whole world was hunting.

And as I thought of him and the crew of lost and reckless men who did his will, the fair landscape seemed to darken, the sweet airs to be tainted. . . .

The path I traversed was the coastguard's path, as

I could see by the white-washed boulders to serve as a guide by night. It was never more than two or three yards away from the brink of the savage precipices that fell for two hundred and fifty feet sheer to the water. The ocean was on my left; on the right the great hill, known as Carne Zerran, towered up, and the edge of the high moors cut the sky. On that side it was as though one were walking at the bottom of a cup.

After about half a mile of the path, it suddenly left the cliff edge, and turned inland. For several hundred yards the brink was guarded by a semicircle of barbed-wire fence, which made it impossible to approach. A notice board informed the wayfarer that here, owing to old mining operations, the cliff was extremely dangerous.

It looked so, indeed. The edge was broken and irregular. I saw that it ran out in a curious headland for a considerably way, a mere wall of rock with a razor-back path on the top, which curved round again and ran parallel to the cliff on which I was, making a mighty chasm from which rose the cries of innumerable sea-birds. There was a narrow mouth seawards, and another headland jutted out to make a cove like the one at the inn, though that, of course, had no winding cañon at the end.

I crept up to the brink, where the wire fence began, and, lying down, with one arm round the first post, peered over.

It was a terrible place. The rock overhung so for hundreds of yards that I could not see the bottom. But the other side of the cañon was clear to view, a great wall of black rock, where sea-hawks nested, and inaccessible to the boldest climber. To the right the cove seemed to be of fair size from horn to horn, but it was no tranquil spot like the one at the back of the inn. Even on a calm day like the present, the Atlantic ground swell poured in with tremendous force, and was broken with ferocious whirlpools and spray-fountains by toothed rock-ledges a foot or two below the surface. The smallest boat could not have entered Tregeraint Cove and lived there for a moment.

For some reason or other the place affected me most unpleasantly, and it was with a little shudder that I retreated and skirted the fence which guarded the dangerous part of the cliff. When I had passed by this, the path turned at right angles and went inland.

As I turned I saw, perhaps a furlong away, the house of Helzephron.

It lay upon the eastern slope of Carne Zerran, an ancient, grim-looking house of granite, long, low, and of considerable size. A few stunted trees grew round about, and a fairly extensive domain of gardens, as I supposed, surrounded by a high wall. Using my prism glasses, I could see that this wall was topped by iron spikes. Of course, I was considerably below Tregeraint as on the sloping hill-side, and it lay quite open to

view. Higher up, and beyond the house, was the derrick, engine-house and sheds of the mine, with here and there dumps of debris and various sheds.

Although the wire fences, which I soon made out, went round the whole property, it lay quite open to the view. And when I had passed it, and climbed to the table-land of the moor beyond, I saw that it would be even more open to the eyes—spread out like a map, in short.

One thing was already certain. There was nothing whatever in the nature of a hangar, no building that could possibly shelter even an ordinary four or five seater biplane, to say nothing of an air cruiser.

I was not disappointed, because I had hardly expected to meet with anything of the kind. The pirate ship, you will remember, was—like all the big long-distance airships—a cross between what used to be known in the old days as the "seaplane" and the "flying-boat." True, some of our war aeroplanes of quite large size were fitted with floats that could be raised, and wheels for land work in addition.

This might be the case with the pirate. But it was not to be thought of for a moment that a man of Helzephron's intelligence would dare to house his extraordinary ship where any one of my police could have investigated simply by showing his badge of office. The land policeman and the coastguards of the whole English coastline had already reported on

every hangar and aerodrome in the kingdom. If Helzephron was the man I believed him, I was well aware that we were only at the beginning of the duel.

I mounted up past the wire fences and the mine. I did not dare to use my glasses in passing, for I saw in the distance one or two figures of men strolling about by the engine-house and derrick. But when I was at last among the heather at the top, I lay down, and took a long survey of the buildings, drawing a careful map in my pocket-book, which might prove of great use later on.

I waited half an hour at the little station of St. Erth, and then caught a train to Penzance, arriving at the hotel about tea-time. As I came into the lounge, after a wash and brush up, I saw Danjuro sitting in one corner. He had a pile of newspapers round him, and I saw that the London journals had arrived.

He handed me one of them as I sat down. A paragraph among the police news was marked in pencil.

Major Helzephron had been taken to Vine Street Police Station, and locked up for the night, charged with an aggravated assault on Mr. Wag Ashton at the Mille Colonnes Restaurant, on the evidence of M. Nicholas and the head-waiter.

A medical man had attended the Court on behalf of the prosecutor, to say that Mr. Ashton was too unwell to appear until the morrow. Upon his prom-

ising to attend the Court the next day, Major Helzephron was admitted to bail.

"That gives us nearly two clear days," said Danjuro. "When Ashton does appear, he will not press the case, and will own that he gave provocation; Helzephron will be fined, perhaps let off. I see that Honorable Ashton battered him a good deal! And now, your news, Sir John, if you please."

CHAPTER XI

"THE AIR WOLVES ARE HUNTING TO-NIGHT!"

HE made no comment, and did not interrupt me until I had completely finished, nor did his inscrutable face give any indication of what he thought.

"My own investigations," he said, "can be told in a few words. The small steamship which brings supplies to the cove behind the inn is the private property of Helzephron, and she is a great deal faster and much better engined than most people are aware. She lies at the little port of Hayle, which is on the main line from Plymouth to Penzance, in St. Ives Bay. At certain times *large quantities of petrol arrive in separate consignments from different parts of the country.* The *Sea Gull* is loaded to her capacity, and then makes the short voyage to Zerran Cove."

"That's the last link!" I said. "No one could doubt now!"

"There is another, still more interesting fact. Hayle was once a place of much greater importance than it is at present. There were large foundries and engi-

neering works there in the past. These have been abandoned, owing to the silting up of the harbor, for many years, as only vessels of small draught can enter easily to-day. But the foundry buildings remain. From time to time a portion of them has been let for this or that small enterprise. Three years ago Helzephron rented a part of the works and installed machinery. He had about twenty laborers, but the real work, whatever it was, took place in a large experimental shed, to which no one was admitted but he and his friends. They were already at Zerran, and used to drive over in motors every day. It was locally known that some new machinery for Wheal Tregeraint was being made. Many shippings took place from Hayle to Zerran Cove."

"But the ship, the Pirate Ship itself?"

"Who can tell? We go step by step in the dark. Many theories have crossed my mind. I have dismissed them all. I want to approach this, the most sinister problem of all, with a blank mind. We can do nothing till we are on the spot. Our preliminary work is over, but the real labor begins."

"A sinister problem enough," I answered bitterly. "But not the most trouble to me. I tell you, Danjuro, that as I lay among the heather and looked down upon that lonely house, as I thought of the devilish crew that live there, for a moment my heart turned to water, and the agony was more than I could endure.

She may be there, at this moment, defenseless and in the power . . ."

I could not go on. I covered my face with my hands, and was nearer breaking down than ever before. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. "It has never left my mind, either. Do not give way, for the moment of action has come. We go to the inn at Zerran to-night —within the hour."

"To-night!"

"Yes. We cannot afford to waste a moment. Helzephron is kept in London. One great danger is removed from our path. We shall never have a better opportunity than now. In dealing with enemies such as ours, we must strike quickly and strongly when they think themselves most secure. Before dawn we must have penetrated the inmost secrets of Tregeraint."

I had by now grown accustomed to regard Danjuro as the leader of our enterprise. His decision was like cool water to a man dying of thirst in a desert. I stood up, absolutely myself. "There is, of course, no reason why we should not install ourselves at Zerran to-night instead of to-morrow morning. Trewhella won't mind," I said.

"I will order the car in an hour. Meanwhile, I have one or two things to do. Perhaps you will settle the hotel bill, Sir John, and tell the people that we are leaving? . . ."

It was a stiflingly hot night as the car climbed up

to the moors, and in the glare of our headlights the gorse and heather by the roadside streamed swiftly like some golden cinema, leaving a more sable dark before and behind them. Danjuro, by my side, was lost in thought. The massive head hung upon his chest. About half-way on our journey he said a curious thing. "This would be an ideal night for another raid in the air-lanes of the Atlantic."

I did not answer, for I, also, was thinking deeply. So it was for to-night! We crossed swords, fired the first shot, what you will, with our cunning enemy in a few hours. What would they bring forth?

I felt no fear, only a deep resolution not to fail in rescue and the execution of Justice. I was happier than I had been for days, for it is thought that turns the bones to pith and thins the blood, not action. And, as we flashed down the dark moor road to where the lights of the solitary inn showed yellow, I sent a wordless prayer to the Throne of Justice and Mercy. And, as if an answer was truly and instantly vouchsafed, there came into my mind these words from the ninety-first Psalm: "I will deliver thee from the snare of the fowler."

And after that I put mere abstract thought away from me.

As we rolled up silently to the inn, we heard a great noise of singing from the long room. A tall woman came out of a side door, and I explained that

we had decided to come earlier than we had planned. She was a comely, good-humored dame, who made no trouble about our arrival. Both bedrooms and sitting-rooms were prepared, and when Thumbwood had taken the car round to the barn, he went upstairs to unpack the baggage. Mr. Trewhella appeared from the bar. I introduced Danjuro, and we arranged to have some supper at half-past ten.

Meanwhile the singing continued in great volume, mingled with the twanging chords of a banjo.

"Your guests are merry to-night," said Danjuro.

"It's the gentlemen from the mine, sir," said the landlord. "It's one of their nights off, so to speak. Would you like to join 'em for half an hour?"

"I think not on our first night. But they sing very well. As a foreigner I am interested in all English customs; may I take a peep? . . ."

He had gone to the communicating door as he spoke, and pulling aside a red curtain which covered the upper half of glass, he looked through. I did the same.

The long room was full of people and tobacco smoke. With a single exception, that of Mr. Vargus, they were all quite young men, ranging, I should say, from three-and-twenty to thirty. Most of them were dressed in old tweed suits, but the material and cut told their own tale, and spoke of the "right" kind of tailor. At first glance they might have been a collection of naval

officers or senior undergraduates, but only at first glance. My eyes roved from face to face, and on each I saw the loss of innocence and honor. Some were cunning; others had a brutality in ill accord with their youth, and there was a hard bravado in the eyes of all. It was sickening. One felt that one had suddenly looked upon something that should remain hidden. In that haze of smoke lurked all that was vaguely horrible, all that was monstrous and evil in the universe.

I almost wanted to spit upon the floor, in an uncontrollable gesture of repudiation. As I turned, I saw the landlord looking at me.

"A promising lot of young devils," said I.

"You do see it too, zur?" he replied, and then Danjuro touched my arm, and I turned to look again. A man, without a hat, had just entered the room from the outside. He sat in a chair which he had obviously occupied before, for he was in naval uniform, and his cap was lying there. He was a big, foolish-looking fellow, far gone in drink, but despite that his face was the only wholesome one there.

"Who is that?" I whispered to Trewhella, as Mr. Vargus poured a generous allowance of rum into the new-comer's glass.

"That's Billy Pengelly, our coastguard. The gentlemen do make a lot of him, and he's none the better for't, for Billy's one as likes his drop. Still, he goes and sleeps it off, and he belong to be strong as a bull.

And in these lone parts there's not often anyone to see if he's on the watch or not."

A tall boy with a banjo took up his instrument and twanged the chords.

"Now, gentlemen!" he shouted in a clear fresh tenor, "a chorus!" And without further preliminary he dashed into nothing less than the "Pirate's Chanty" from "Treasure Island":

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!
Yo, ho! and a bottle of rum!"

The inn rocked with the volume of sound. I stood there fascinated, with a sort of horror. The thing—knowing what I knew—was so daring and grim that, more than anything else, it showed me with whom we had to deal.

The application was lost upon Danjuro, but I told him what it meant in French, and he nodded with contracted eyes.

"Drink, and the devil had done for the rest,
Yo, ho! and a bottle of rum!"

One would have thought that the room could not contain the noise, and that the very windows must be shattered, and in the very middle of it I heard something else—the urgent, throbbing sound of an engine.

Danjuro heard it as soon as I did. "Motor-bicycle," he whispered.

The sound grew insistent. Whoever was coming rode hell for leather and with the exhaust open. Then there was a succession of reports, a grinding noise, and the door of the bar was flung suddenly open.

A tall man in goggles and overalls covered with dust walked in. As he did so, the pirate chant stopped with dramatic suddenness, and the singers jumped to their feet. Then he removed his glasses and his cap.

It was Major Helzephron.

They clustered round him thickly, and to each one he said a quiet word. In every case, when this happened, the man spoken to nodded and vanished into the night. I could hear them running outside the inn. Lastly, Helzephron took Vargus by the arm, and they also passed out. I could see the man more plainly than ever before. There was a great bruise round about the left eye, and the face was pale. But it blazed with will and purpose, and the cruel mouth was set in a malicious and abominable smile.

"The wolves are hunting to-night!" Danjuro said to me two minutes later in my bedroom, and once again his face was like a demon of Old Japan. "Helzephron will not appear at the police court to-morrow. He was arranged it somehow, and, after all, it is a trivial affair. He has ridden down from London during the day."

"You mean that there is going to be a raid to-night?"

"I feel sure of it. Why else should Helzephron rush from London? And you observed the manner of his confederates. Don't you see this—with all his cunning precautions the pirate is far too clever not to know that his career must be a short one. He cannot hope to remain concealed for any great length of time. His object is to obtain an immense fortune *quickly*. Already I calculate he has stolen jewels and money to the value of two hundred thousand pounds. A few more such coups and he can disband his crew and disappear for ever. Speed is the essence of his plan."

"But we must do something, we must stop it. . . ."

"Our opportunity for action is improved, Sir John. In the first place, you must take steps to concentrate a fleet of patrol ships in this neighborhood."

"The car is here. I can write official telegrams in code to Plymouth and London. Within an hour the hinterland and the sea from here to Scilly can be covered with a swarm of ships. St. Ives is only six miles away."

"Write the dispatches at once. I will call Thumbwood, who must take them in, together with an official note from you to the postmaster."

I unlocked my portfolio and wrote the wires. There should be such an invasion of the air to-night as Far West Cornwall had never known!

Thumbwood appeared, I gave him full instructions, and heard the Rolls-Royce start below.

"And now, our part!" I said to Danjuro.

"If we are right in our conjecture, the pirates will shortly leave Tregeraint on their expedition. How they will join the airship or where we don't know. But we may safely assume that the house will be left in charge of one or at most two men. The others will all be wanted to man the ship; it is a simple calculation. Here is your chance. You must get inside Tregeraint, obtain conclusive evidence, and if the poor lady is there alive, bring her away in safety. Perhaps to-night the Pirate Ship will make its last cruise! Our presence here, our identity, is quite unsuspected. A concentration of hostile airships in this neighborhood is the last thing Helzephron will expect to-night."

"And you, my friend?"

"I would that I could come with you, for you go in danger of your life, but, as I see it, my work should be different. Someone, in view of its escape, *must* solve the mystery of the Pirate Ship itself. I have a theory already; I must put it to proof. There are boats in the cove below—I see that the moon is rising, I know what I must do. But, even so, I will come with you, Sir John, if you say so."

I shook my head. "No, I will go alone. It is my job."

Then Danjuro did a strange thing. He took my

hand, bowed over it and kissed it! "You also are of the Samurai!" he said.

In a minute more he carried in a heavy bag from his own bedroom, and produced from it a miscellany of objects.

"Here is a twelve-shot automatic, with a dozen cartridge clips," he said. "You know all about the working of it? I thought so. This pair of wire-cutters you will need for the barbed fence. These two keys with adjustable wards—you turn the milled screw at the end to adjust them—will open any ordinary lock. Here also is an extremely powerful steel lever, with a wedge end. In the hands of a strong man like yourself it will wrench open most windows or doors."

God knows there was no lightness in my heart, but in the usual English way at serious moments, I laughed.

"The Complete Burglar!" I said.

Danjuro looked at me with a glance as cold as ice.

"I am in most deadly earnest, Sir John. You know what my experience has been. Well, I say deliberately that I have never been in such peril as you are going into."

"I meant nothing. And what is this?" I had taken up a little leather tube with a lens at one end.

"A powerful electric torch. But it is more than that. You can instantly reverse it in your hand, and if you press this stud, the plated bottom flies open, and by means of a spring an ounce of cayenne pepper is

projected for several yards. It will stop anyone and operates instantaneously. A little thing I invented and have found most useful. These handcuffs are of papier mâché and weigh practically nothing. They are from Japan and tough as the hardest steel. You may require them. And I never go on an expedition without this tiny bottle of chloroform and pad. You can stow everything about you with ease, and the combined weight is as nothing."

I did so, and it was as he said. Then a thought struck me.

"Armed and prepared like this, I feel certain that I shall get in. But there are two Tibetan mastiffs let loose in the grounds at night. I can shoot them, but the noise of the report . . ."

"That is provided for, Sir John. You see this gun?"

"It looks like a short-barreled rook-rifle, except for the great thickness at the breech."

"It holds ten conical bullets. They are hollow-nosed and expand on impact. The point is that the gun is perfectly noiseless. Powder is not used at all. The propelling power is liquefied carbonic-acid gas, and all that is heard at the moment of firing is a sharp snap. With this you can stalk the dogs and kill them easily enough. Do not forget your hunting flask and brandy and water. And for concentrated food, should you be detained in hiding, though I and Thumbwood will be

coming to look after you if you don't appear by morning, these solid chocolate cakes are invaluable."

All this was done quickly, and with the most business-like precision. Although my sense of humor told me that I was like the White Knight in "Alice in Wonderland," I did realize that I should be a terribly nasty customer to tackle, and I was grateful.

While we had been talking there came sounds from below of the closing of the inn, and shortly after we were called to supper.

"Don't you stay up any longer, Mr. Trewhella," I said. "You must want your rest. As for us, we are late birds. Both I and my friend sometimes take a five minutes' stroll last thing before we turn in. That won't inconvenience you?"

"Bless your life, no, zur. You do as you're a mind here. 'Tesn't like a town. The key of the front door hangs on a nail by the side. And if you *should* be going out later, Billy Pengelly's in the empty pigsty, a sleeping off what he's had, and there's a bucket of cold water on the wall. In half an hour's time or so I know as he'd be grateful for having it poured over 'en!"

We promised to perform what was evidently one of the amenities of this primitive place and Mr. Trewhella withdrew.

"That coastguard may be useful to me," Danjuro said. "And now, Sir John, I don't want to hurry you,

but my advice is that you start. I don't suppose that the band has left Tregeraint yet. But there are a hundred hiding-places on the moor all round the domain, and you may be able to see which way they go before you make your own attempt. I shall be on the trail in a very few minutes after you."

"And Charles? He will be back shortly."

"I shall need him. I know he would wish to be with you, Sir John, but I believe your chances are better alone. I shall not leave until he returns, provided he is not unduly detained."

He went to the window and pulled aside the curtain. "A waning moon," he said, "which will be at full power about midnight, when there may be such a battle in the air as the world will hear with wonder!"

I saw to my gear. It fitted about me very comfortably.

"Well, good-night," I said, and without further words I went quietly out of the house.

When I got a hundred yards away I turned and looked at it, all silvered in the moon. The air was sweet with the perfume of shy moorland flowers that give up all their treasure to the night. The Atlantic, far below, made a sound like fairy dreams, and on the distant slopes of Carne Zerran an owl sounded his melancholy oboe note.

A lovely night, gentlemen!

CHAPTER XII

THE KILLING OF MICHAEL FEDDON

THE moon was in its last quarter, and shed a faint spectral light over the moor as I came quietly up to the first of the barbed-wire fences that surrounded Tregeraint. I lay down in the heath, certain that I was quite invisible, and waited.

An hour had hardly elapsed since the band had left "The Miners' Arms." Were they still here, or had they set out for their unknown destination? I could not hear a sound of any kind. From where I lay the high wall hid the house, and among the mine buildings higher up there was neither light nor movement. Tregeraint might have been deserted for a hundred years, and the roaring company of the inn had vanished into thin air. And strain my eyes as I would, there was no sign of the great Tibetan dogs.

I remained motionless for a quarter of an hour by the illuminated dial of my watch. Then, as nothing happened, I began operations. The wire was tough and intricate, but ten minutes' work with Danjuro's

powerful cutters disposed of it sufficiently for me to crawl through both the first and second fence without a scratch. I stood now in the lower portion of a large, oblong paddock of short grass, all gray in the moon. The surrounding wall of the Manor was about a hundred yards up the slope, and with the gas rifle on my arm I glided over the intervening space like a ghost. My boots were soled with india-rubber and I made no sound at all.

I found the wall to be ten or eleven feet high. It was crowned with a *cheval de frise* of iron spikes, and, owing to its height and smooth surface, quite insurmountable. But I knew there must be an entrance somewhere, and never expected to climb the barrier, and I began a cautious circuit. About half-way round the extent I came to a wooden door set in the wall. It was a mere postern, not more than five feet high, and had a barred *grille* in the center of about a foot square. I reflected that this must be a side or garden exit, and that the main gate was probably on the other side, facing the mine-head. But it was all the better for my purpose if this was so, and I took out my steel "jimmy" and prepared to tackle it.

My intention was to prise it open with my tool, for I am a very powerful man, but suddenly another idea occurred to me. The bars of the *grille* were old and rusted. As there was no key-hole in the door, it was obviously secured by bolts. I inserted my lever, and

without putting out my full strength, and with little more sound than is made by the striking of a match, soon had three of the bars out of the wood and lying on the grass.

My arms are long. I pushed my right through and my fingers, after a little groping, caught the handle of the bolt, which slid back easily enough. It had been oiled and showed that the door, which swung back at once, was in constant use.

I stepped within, treading like a cat, and closed the door behind me. I stood in a large and neglected garden, where shrubs and flowers grew as they would and formed a miniature jungle, through which I could see the dark façade of the house, now quite close. Everything was as still as death, and I listened with strained attention for several minutes. So far the work had been ridiculously easy, but as I crept up a moss-grown path towards the building every nerve was on the alert. I was not afraid, I think I can truly say so, but there was a chill on my soul. This old house, with its atmosphere of robbery and murder, its singular and formidable inhabitants, the unknown dangers of the approach, and, above all, the thought that Connie might be within it, all combined to wrap me in a terrible gloom of the spirit. Yet, looking back, I see that this was well. It hardened all my resolution and made me terrible.

I had no thought of it then, but now I can see the grim horror of such a being as I had become approaching the house step by step. . . .

All the lower windows were shuttered. There was not a gleam of light anywhere as I followed the path and came to the front, where there was a grass-grown gravel sweep and iron gates in the wall. This part of the house was plain and unadorned, save for a pillared porch and steps leading down to the drive. A thick growth of ivy covered it from the ground to the first-floor windows, and after I had gently tried the heavy front door, which, as I expected, was locked, this suggested a mode of entrance. If I could climb up and get on to the roof of the porch, it might be possible to force the central bedroom window, which I could see was unshuttered.

The ivy was of ancient growth, the stems thick and tough. Any schoolboy could have mounted to the top of the porch. And any boy could have pushed back the catch of the window with the blade of his pocket-knife, opened it and stepped inside.

I stood in a bedroom, dark, except for a little pool of moonlight by the window. I felt curtains, and I drew them before I switched on my torch. It was an ordinary bedroom, very untidy, furnished with a suite of painted deal. There was, however, a great saucer-bath full of water, and a pair of Indian clubs. The wall was hung with photographs of football teams, and

in an open drawer of the little dressing-table was a pile of gold and notes.

Commonplace enough, like an undergraduate's room at Oxford, but, nevertheless, it affected me unpleasantly. It was like a sudden intimacy with something abominable, as I opened the door inch by inch, and felt for the powerful pistol in my pocket. My heart hung poised for an instant as I stepped out into a dark corridor, and then I gave a gasp, and my heart almost stopped beating.

I stood at the head of broad, shallow stairs. Below was a large hall, dimly lit, and pouring up to me in a volume of sound came the melodious thunder of a piano played by a master hand!

At first my knees grew weak, and I clutched the shadowy banisters to save me from falling. Constance! Who could be playing in this evil house but she! I can never forget the agonized pang of mingled joy and horror that I felt. But as I crouched and listened, the fierce emotion passed away. Whoever was playing, it was not my girl. A lost soul made that music.

I glided down the stairs. Certainly the wolves had left their lair, though in what manner I could not divine. The house was inhabited by but one or two people at most. All the doors along the corridor stood open, as if the rooms had been left in a hurry. The

building *felt* deserted, empty of its usual inhabitants. . . .

A dim light came from an open door at the right of the hall. I peeped in and saw a long shadowy room of great size. The walls were paneled and hung here and there with pictures, the floor carpeted. Two immense oak tables, with their complement of chairs, went up and down the center, and it hardly needed a butler's hatch in the wall, doubtless communicating with the kitchen, to tell me that this was the dining-room of Helzephron and his bucaneers.

At the far end, and opposite the entrance door, was a wide and lofty archway, half covered by a curtain. It led to another room beyond, and it was from this that a bright light streamed, and the sound of music came.

I placed my gas rifle on the floor by the wall, took out my automatic, unlocking the safety catch, and went to the curtain on tiptoe. There was an alcove at the side, where some shelves had been, and this was perfectly dark. I marked it as a possible hiding-place, and then pulled the curtain aside for half an inch. Just as I did so there was a clash of prelude, and the pianist began the enchanted Third Ballade of Chopin.

It was the man known to me as Vargus, the man with the smooth voice, the face that was evil and refined. He sat at a magnificent grand piano, swaying a little on his stool. . . .

Do you know that marvelous composition of Chopin's? Most people have heard it at least once or twice in their lives, played by some *maestro*. I have heard the renderings of the great pianists of the world, but none played as this man played.

A terrible remorse informed the unearthly music. It was as though the player strained with every power of his being to recapture something irrevocably lost. When he came to that strange passage which has been so often compared to the soft cantering of a horse, the pain in the lovely chords was unbearable. The artist, Aubrey Beardsley, made a wonderful drawing of this passage—a spectral white charger ambling through a dark wood of pines, bearing a lady in a cloak of black velvet. The picture rose before my eyes as I stood, but it flashed away, and words of awful significance took its place in my mind and fitted themselves to the closing chords. . . .

"Night and day he was among the tombs, and on the hills, crying out and beating himself with stones."

As you may know, the piece ends in a furious welter of sound. It had just concluded, and the player sat motionless as a wax doll, when another figure heaved itself into my line of vision, a burly giant, with red hair and a heavy, sullen face.

"Now you've finished that —— row," he growled,

"we'd better be moving. We may get signals coming through soon. And I suppose I must feed the canaries!"

I knew the man at once. There was no possibility of mistake. It was Michael Feddon, the famous Rugby international, and six years ago the idol of the public. It was said that he was the finest back that England had ever seen. In the height of his career he had been mixed up in a horrible, criminal scandal, and received five years' penal servitude.

I swallowed in my throat with loathing, but the next words drove all thought of Feddon's career from my mind.

"Everything is ready on a tray in the kitchen, and the soup is on the electric stove. It will be hot by now," said Vargus, in his soft, creamy voice.

"I'll get it, and I wish the damned business was over. I said from the first that when the Chief brought those two women here we ran more risk than ever before. It'll turn out badly yet. Mark my words, Vargus."

Vargus took up a bottle which stood on a table by the piano. It was brandy, and he poured out two glasses half full, adding soda from a siphon.

"Here's luck; not a bit of it," he said. "If all goes well to-night, a couple more expeditions will see us finished, with a hundred thousand each, and scattered all over the globe. We all have our fancies. The

Chief's is this Shepherd girl. Well, in another fortnight he'll disappear with her. Every man to his taste."

Feddon swallowed his brandy at a gulp. "She'll lead him a dance yet!" he said. "I never saw such a spitfire. I hate going near her, and I wish it wasn't my turn to stay at home. I'd tame her, though, if she were mine. I wouldn't stand her pretty ways and the things she says, like the Chief does. He's mad about the girl."

"And what would you do, my beefy friend?" said Vargus, with his abominable smile.

Feddon touched his middle. He was wearing a leather belt. "Take this to her," he said, "and beat her black and blue."

Vargus rose, grinning. "Well, get the food," he said. "I'll go down at once. You'll find me in the wireless cabin."

Feddon lurched forward. I had just time to press myself into the alcove, when he came through the curtain and strode heavily through the room into the hall.

Vargus went to a tall mirror by the piano, as I watched him breathlessly. He did something that I could not see, and it swung open like a door. There was the snap of an electric switch, and I saw him step into a lift, pull a rope, and sink out of sight, leaving the door open.

He could not have sunk ten feet when I was in the room. It was large and square, furnished with something like luxury, and brilliantly lit with electric globes.

There was an arm-chair in full view of the archway. I sat down, and it was still warm from its last occupant. That seemed to me amusing, and I smiled.

Something clanked, a soft swishing noise changed to a distant rumble, and the lift came into sight. I had it covered, but it was empty—waiting for the man who was going to "feed the canaries."

I waited for him, too. There was a box of cigarettes close by. I lit one and smoked quietly. Then I heard him coming through the dining-room, his footsteps and the rattle of a tray.

The half-drawn curtain bellied out and was pushed aside. Feddon stood there with the tray in his hands and the light shining on his ugly red hair.

He saw me. His mouth opened and his eyes started out. He seemed unutterably foolish, like a great cod, and I laughed aloud.

But he was quick, oh, quick and clever! Like the famous footballer that he was! In a second he had ducked, and the loaded tray was skimming across the room straight at my head, as he hurled himself after it, quick as a snake strikes.

I was ready, though. He was not. My first shot broke his shoulder and stopped him for an instant.

Then, with a roar of pain and fury, he came on again, and I shot him through the heart when he was three feet away.

Mr. Feddon would feed no more canaries.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECRET THAT PUZZLED TWO CONTINENTS

I STOOD looking down at Michael Feddon's body. I was stunned. For the man I had just killed I cared nothing, felt no emotion. I had saved him from the drop; that was all. But, though I had been convinced that Danjuro's and my own suspicions were absolute fact, the full realization had come so suddenly that it clouded the mind.

Constance *was* here, and she was unharmed!

I had, indeed, penetrated into the very center of this lair of the air-wolves, and already had enough evidence to hang the lot. For a minute the mingled joy and relief was so great that I could not grasp them.

The brandy bottle of Mr. Vargus was still on the side table. I stepped over the body—the leather belt which he had proposed as an instrument of correction for Constance was in full view—and helped myself sparingly. Almost immediately my brain cleared.

I listened intently. The two shots from my automatic had alarmed no one. The sinister house was as

silent as before. It seemed quite certain that Feddon and Vargus alone remained to guard it. Even the two Tibetan mastiffs of which I had heard so much had disappeared.

To my right, the tall mirror swung on its hinges, and the lift beyond was lit by a globe in the roof. To what it led I did not know, probably some cellar where poor Constance and her maid were imprisoned, though a lift seemed superfluous. At any rate, Vargus—the next person to tackle—was down there, and it was long odds that I could not get the better of him. Moreover, and this was in my favor, he was expecting Feddon, and the arrival of the lift would not startle him at first, if he were close by.

I examined the lift. It was electrically operated, and of a type perfectly familiar to me, fitted with an automatic magnetic brake. I saw that it traveled from its secret recess behind the mirror to one other spot only, stopping nowhere on the way. A touch of the rope started it, and it would stop itself when its journey was done.

Well, there was no use waiting. Again I must plunge into the unknown. Connie was waiting! I wondered how honorable Danjuro was getting on, and laid myself long odds that he wasn't having such an exciting time as I was! How he would stare if he came back to "The Miners' Arms" in a few hours and found me there with Connie, and the artistic Mr.

Vargus cooling down in the patent *papier mâché* handcuffs from Japan! Mr. Trewhella of the inn had shown me a large pig, which he called "Gladys," and of which he was fond. There was a vacant and stoutly-built sty next door, which would be an excellent place of confinement for the interpreter of Chopin!

. . . Yes, I thought these thoughts, even at that moment. I was madly exhilarated. Everything had gone so easily and well. I stepped into the lift humming a song. It was the old chanty that the pirates had roared in the inn two short hours ago:

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest."

There was a looking-glass on one side of the lift—probably the thing had been bought entire at some sale—and I saw myself in it. The song died away. Whose was this grim and terrible face, gashed with deep lines, with eyes that smoldered with a red light? Mine? I have told you how Danjuro looked when the bloodhound that he was emerged for an instant from behind the bland Oriental mask. There was not a pin to choose between us.

The lift sank slowly. Every second I expected the soft jerk of its stopping. But the seconds went on. Down and down, what cellar was it that lay so low? Were we dropping to the center of the earth? It seemed an age before the motion slowed, and I had already obtained an inkling of the truth when a dim

archway rose up before me, and the machine came to rest.

This was no cellar. I was deep down in Tregeraint Mine, which must run under the house itself! In the necessity for fox-like caution, I did not follow out the thought—not yet. But I believe that the subconscious brain had already seen far into the mystery. . . .

I stepped out into a mine cutting. The walls were cut in the rock, and the roof here and there shored up with heavy timber props. It was wide enough for two men to walk abreast, and quite eight feet high. Every fifteen yards or so hung a roughly-wired electric lamp, and the floor was beaten hard by the passage of many feet. The air was hot and stagnant.

I prowled down this passage without a sound, my pistol in my hand, ready to shoot at sight, but for what seemed an interminable time I met no one, and saw nothing but the damp walls, here and there sparkling with yellow pyrites and the green of copper.

There came at length a rough wooden door, which swung easily open, and beyond a much narrower and higher passage than before, a more natural cleft in the immemorial rock, it seemed, owing nothing to the agency of human hands. It dripped with water. Hitherto I had been walking on a level, now I trod a fairly steep descent, while the path was no longer straight, but full of fantastic twistings. Each mo-

ment the air grew cooler, and each moment a deep, murmurous noise, like very faint and muffled drums, grew louder.

The lights, now suspended from a thick and tarry cable, were less frequent than at first, and the place was full of shadows. But as for the noise, that could only be one thing, the Atlantic ground swell. I was approaching the sea, doubtless by one of the old mine "adits," made for ventilation many years ago and long before the invention of the electric fan.

The narrow way ended in a door. It was latched but not locked, and I pushed it slowly open. Immediately there was a sense of vast and gloomy space. I say "gloomy," for it was not absolutely dark. Here and there hung dim, yellow lights. . . .

Advancing a step or two upon a floor of hard earth on sand, I found myself in a vast cavern. It seemed as large as the shell of a cathedral, and for organ there was the plangent, echoing sound of sea waves. The sound came from my right, and was carried on a current of sweet, brine-laden air. Peering through the darkness, I seemed to be aware of a faint, ghostly radiance, a considerable distance away.

I had lost the capacity for amazement, but not of quick thinking. In a lightning flash of realization I knew that I had penetrated to the heart of Helzephron's secret, even before my thoughts arranged themselves in sequence. And then, as near as possible

coincident with my stepping through the door, I heard a shout.

Someone had seen me. . . .

The shout came from the other side of the long, aisle-shaped cave. Simultaneously, half-way up the side, at a height of thirty feet from the floor, there was a sudden illumination. I saw a broad ledge in the wall, railed round, with a ladder staircase descending from it. A little black figure was leaning over the rail, and it was from this that the shouting came. It did not need his words to tell me that here was a wireless station. I could see the drum and the battery shelf quite distinctly.

"A signal!" he shouted, and I knew that he took me for the dead man above. "They're coming back! The sky swarms with armed patrols and warships. They've had to run for it, but the Chief thinks he's shaken them off. I must switch on the guides!"

I gave an answering shout, keying my voice down to something like Feddon's bass growl.

"It's C.Q.D.!—C.Q.D.!" came in a shrill voice of alarm, and Mr. Vargus ran down the ladder like an ape.

C.Q.D.! The signal of "extreme danger." Well, I rather thought it was!

Where I stood I was in deep shadow, and my face could not possibly be seen. I was much the same height and build as the dead man, and Vargus ran

down the cave without the least suspicion. He had gone to his left, my right, to where I had already seen a pale light, and I followed him, more slowly, at a distance of some ten yards. It was a natural instinct enough. My only idea was to silence him, find Constance, and fly from the horrible place. I could not know that I was making a fatal mistake.

I was running forward into complete understanding. The great cave turned a little to the right. It opened out every second until at length I saw the mouth, wide as that of the largest-sized hangar on an aerodrome, flooded with moonlight!

Opposite, sixty yards away, was a precipitous wall of black rock; between it and the mouth of the cave a terrible chasm, which fell sheer to the water. It was all clear now. Far above, on the top of the cliffs, was that fenced-in part with the "dangerous" notice boards. You will remember that I had lain down by the side of this fence and peered downwards. I had looked into the same gulf that I was now looking into from a much lower altitude. And the rock there overhung so greatly that there was no possible indication of the cave mouth where I now stood.

Moreover, the cave itself turned *inward* from the sea, running parallel to the cliff. *From the sea, as from the land, the opening of the cave was entirely hidden.*

Vargus was fumbling at a switch-board. He pulled

down a vulcanite handle; there was a green spark, and lights at the top, bottom and sides of the entrance glowed out brightly.

Imagine an illuminated rabbit-hole in the side of a railway embankment, and you have an exact miniature of what this vast secret cave had now become. Go a little further and think of a bat whose lair was in this hole, and was guided to it by the lights. . . .

Vargus snapped another and smaller switch. I watched him with a sense of complete detachment. I knew, as well as if I had been told, that he was lighting guiding lamps somewhere on the two headlands that guarded the entrance to the cave outside. No thought of danger came to me; I think joy at this complete discovery, and wonder at the stupendous cunning and achievement of it all were my only emotions.

"They may be here at any moment, Feddon. I tell you I don't like it at all. I told the Chief that it was madness not to lie low for a bit. But you know what he is. The Government has got the tip somehow, the Cornish seas are *humming* with enemies. That fellow, Custance, is smart as they make them. . . ."

He was moving towards me as these words came from him in a nervous, disjointed stream of words. Then he saw me, and stopped bang in the middle of a sentence.

It was my moment.

"How do you do, Mr. Vargus," I said. "You mentioned my name. Indeed, you paid me a compliment for which I thank you. I thought I'd drop in for a chat. Sorry to find Major Helzephron out."

I never saw a man in such deadly fear. His face went the color of cheese, and a horrible choking noise began in his throat. He staggered to within a yard of the brink; another step and he would have plunged into the abyss.

"You, you, *you!*" he said, the last word in a dreadful whisper.

"The Oxford professor—yes. Mr. Vargus, I am a lover of music, and you have entertained me royally to-night. But you have played Chopin for the last time in this world."

I lifted the pistol and covered his heart. His yellow mask quivered and was still. "Quickly, please," he said, and there was even a faint smile of relief about his pallid lips.

He could face death gladly, and I knew why. To have shot him there and cast his body to the void would have been a mercy. I had other uses for Mr. Vargus.

My pistol hand was steady as a rock. With the left I took out Danjuro's handcuffs and walked up to him.

"Not yet," I said, when I was within a foot.

He saw what I meant. As comprehension leapt into his eyes he tried to step back. He nearly did it,

but I was just too quick for him. I caught his ankle with the crook of my right foot, and he crashed on his back with his head and shoulders actually over the chasm. Before he could move again I had jerked him backwards by the legs, and had him handcuffed.

I pulled him to his feet by his collar, and half marched, half carried him back into the cave. He was nothing more than a bundle of clothes in my hands.

"Now," I said, "take me *at once* to the place where Miss Shepherd is confined, and, though I make no promises, it may go less hardly with you than the rest."

He twisted his head and tried to look me in the face. "If I do, will you shoot me?" he whispered, fawning on me like a beaten dog. "For God's sake shoot me, or give me an opportunity to shoot myself."

"The hangman will save you the trouble," I answered brutally. "Now then, march!" He gave a great wail of despair.

"Ah, you don't know what I was once!" he cried, and there was such a horror of remorse, a damnation so profound in that cry of agony, that a fiend would have been moved.

"I heard you play the Third Ballade," I answered, and my voice was no longer firm.

"Death, please, Death."

"Take me quickly to Miss Shepherd. Then perhaps—I can't kill you myself, but . . ."

It was as though my words poured a new life into his veins. His knees still knocked together in a loathsome paralysis, but he made effort to shamble forward.

CHAPTER XIV

THE AIR PIRATE AT LAST

VARGUS was silent now. Our feet made no noise upon the sandy floor of the cave. It was then that I heard something like a cat purring.

Unconsciously I stopped to listen. No, it wasn't a cat, it was the faint drone of some night beetle; it was . . .

On the right wall of the cavern, remember that my back was turned to its mouth and the sea—there was a sudden flash of white light.

The rest happened in five seconds.

The light leapt out from the wall, and instantaneously the vast vaulted place was brilliantly illuminated. I had a fleeting vision of wooden galleries, a workshop and smithy, piles of stores, and then I wheeled round with a shout of terror. The drone had leapt up to a deep, menacing note, like the E string of a double bass. A circular furnace of white light in the center of a gigantic shadow rushed at me with incredible speed.

A blast of wind struck me like the shell from a six-

inch gun; the drone rose to the echoing shout of an army as the Pirate Airship entered the cave that was its home.

I had just the millionth part of a second in which to realize the truth before my head struck; the wind seemed to tear out my very vitals, and I knew nothing more.

. . . . . .

Once, when I was a boy at the seaside in Wales, I dived into a deep rock pool, and, deceived by the clearness of the water, hit my head against a submerged ledge, and for several seconds was stunned. There was no one with me, but, fortunately, I recovered in time, and with bursting lungs regained the surface.

The experience was repeated now, or so it seemed, with a curious subconscious memory. I thought that I was rushing violently upwards towards the light out of a well of darkness. Each moment the radiance increased and my speed grew greater. There was a sound as of many waters in my ears.

I opened my ears. The light was brilliant, painful. Also, it moved and flashed, and so it was not the sun of twenty years before beating down. . . .

Someone spoke: "Yes, it's the man himself. He's shaved off his mustache, and his hair and skin are dyed. He's a fair chap really. Look at his lower neck and chest. It's Sir John Custance right enough!"

I lay and listened. Although I heard every word, and perceived that an electric torch was dancing about, the conversation hardly seemed to concern me.

There was another voice: "Vargus said he admitted it, but Vargus has fainted again."

Hands felt me all over. Things were taken from my pockets, and there were sharp exclamations of surprise. Somebody gave a long, low whistle.

"No bones broken. His eyes are opening. Give me that flash, Gascoigne."

Someone poured brandy down my throat—I knew it was brandy—and I moved my limbs and groaned.

Then I heard a shout as a door that I could not see was burst open. "Feddon's killed!" came in a high, excited voice. "Poor old Feddy's shot through the heart."

I think it was at this precise moment that I regained full consciousness, and realized that I was not badly hurt. My whole body felt as if it had been severely beaten, but instinct told me that there was no real damage. As for the shock, it was not until several hours afterwards that I felt its effect, though then it meant collapse.

I lay perfectly still, this time by design, and closed my eyes. Everything had come back to me; I remembered every incident from the moment I had cut the barbed wire to that when I had escaped, by a miracle, death from the returning Pirate Ship.

My first thought was one of bitter disappointment. So they had run the gauntlet, after all! The mystery ship had escaped the swarm of cruisers and patrol boats that were looking for her. I believe I ground my teeth with rage. A second afterwards I groaned out loud. The sound was wrung from my very heart. I was too late to rescue Constance now. . . .

All round me there was a buzz of low-pitched voices. Without any trouble at all, I could detect the note of fear and consternation. And it was tonic. My plight seemed desperate enough, but there was a chance yet. They had taken my weapons from me, but others might prove as valuable. The pirates were disorganized, alarmed. Well, craft should meet craft! Surely, the moment was favorable?

I was in a dimly-lit place, surrounded by dark figures. How long I lay thus I do not know, probably for no great space of time. At any rate, I had not been in full possession of my faculties for many minutes when a door opened, and a voice spoke in accents of authority.

It was a voice that I had never heard before, but I knew whose it was.

"I have made a careful examination of the house," came in clear, well-bred tones, "and there is no one there. It is the same outside and all round the fence. I let the dogs loose and they discovered nothing."

"How did this"—I was kicked brutally in the side—"get in, Chief?" asked a voice.

"Cut the fence wire, and managed to open the door in the east wall. Then climbed the porch and entered through Feddon's bedroom. The dogs followed the scent and showed. That doesn't matter much now. The point is that he's here."

"And we know what to deduce from that!" I heard, and pricked up my ears. My friend Mr. Vargus had revived then! There was a soft malignancy in his voice that made me shudder.

"Vargus is right. It is fairly certain that the game's up as far as this place is concerned. They've marked us down, sure enough. In a few minutes I shall take steps to find out exactly how much they *do* know. Meanwhile we appear to have some time before us, and we must carry out the emergency plan that we've so often rehearsed. Gascoigne, Jones and Sutton, Pointz, fill all the petrol tanks to full capacity, load emergency stores, examine and reverse ship. When finished, report to me in my room."

The men hurried away.

"Philips and Minver get on to the moor and report any man or body of men advancing on the house. You will take rifles and act as outposts. At any sign of approach, don't hesitate to fire. Then fall back on the house."

"Shall we take the dogs, Chief? They would be useful."

"No, I shall need them. The rest of you will hold the house till the last moment. Then get into the lift and come down. It will take them some time to find out the way and follow, while one man can hold the passages for any length of time. We shall all be fifty miles out at sea before anyone can break in down here, and all the swag is packed ready to go on board. Vargus, you will stay down here and help me in what I've got to do."

Several other men left the room.

In a lower voice, though I heard every word, Helzephron went on talking to his lieutenant.

". . . Mind you, I don't actually expect an attack in force, but we must be prepared. For all we know, there may be a hundred men waiting on the moor. One thing is certain. They know where, or whereabouts we are, or that gentleman on the floor would not have got in, nor all those ships be cruising about outside. So we must be off with all we can take to our emergency base in the Hebrides. Once outside, nothing can touch us, of course, and we'd get up to sixteen thousand feet at once. Barometer readings make it pretty certain that it will be cloudy at dawn, and it's a million chances to one against our even being seen."

I lay not three yards away. I had not noticed it

until now, but my ankles were tied together, and, weak as I was, any physical effort was impossible. Helzephron had talked over his plans with an absolute disregard of my presence. He may or may not have known that I was conscious; quite obviously he didn't care twopence one way or the other. And that meant one thing and one thing only.

Before the Pirate Ship fled from its lair for the last time John Custance would have ceased to exist in the body.

". . . Now for Sir John. How do you feel, Vargus? You took a nasty toss, and it's damned lucky for you we turned up when we did! Do you feel strong enough to drag Sir John into my room? If so, I'll go ahead and turn on the lights."

"I'm quite strong enough for *that,*" said Mr. Vargus, with a nasty laugh, and in a few seconds he had me by the heels, and was towing me like a log over an uneven floor. It was only by stiffening the muscles of my neck till they cracked that I could keep my head from bruising badly. Then a cloth of some sort was dropped on my face and tied round my head. I felt myself carried for a yard or two, put into a chair with an upright back, and then lashed securely to it by strong cords.

"I'll call you when I want you again," said the voice of Helzephron. "Go and help the others load the ship. And remember that we must take every round

of ammunition we can stow in her. Twenty-four hours' rations will be ample. We can renew those at any time. Shells are quite another matter. Sacrifice everything to them."

A door closed. I heard the creak of a chair as Helzephron sat down. There was a long silence, and through the cloth I could feel that he was watching me.

The duel to the death began. I was as a naked man before another with a sword. I braced every nerve and stiffened my will!

"You are in a very unpleasant predicament, Sir John Custance."

The voice was passionless, even a little weary.

"I think it's mutual, Mr. Helzephron," was my answer, and I put an accent on the *"Mister."* He should have no honorable military title from me.

"Well, that is possible. Indeed, I admit that you have seriously deranged my plans. But the trumps are mine, after all. With your intelligence you must be aware that you have a very short time to live."

"I don't doubt that, but I dispute your estimate of your hand."

"May I ask why?"

"With pleasure. I don't care twopence about my own life in comparison with my duty to society. You care a good deal for yours, and you also have a short time in front of you. If it is any satisfaction to you

to know, you're in a net from which even the particular minor devils that preside over thieves can't free you."

Thus I lied bravely. A good deal, I thought, might depend on my ability to get the scoundrel into a furious rage, and, anyway, it was a delight to insult him.

A sharp breath told me that I had drawn blood.

"You use dangerous language, Sir John. You'll be sorry if you go on."

"Now, look here," I rapped out, in the tone I should have used to an impudent office boy, "please understand that you can't frighten me. I know that bounders of your type don't understand a gentleman and how he feels about things. I only assure you that you will waste your time. And time *ought*"—I said it with meaning—"to be worth more to you now than all the valuables you picked from the pockets of the *Atlantis* passengers."

He came up to me, and I thought that this was the moment. But he only tore the cloth from my head and returned to his chair.

I looked round with interest. The room, no doubt part of the cavern system into which the mine had penetrated, was matchboarded all round. The boarding was painted white, and a cluster of electrics hung from the ceiling. There was a carpet on the floor, a couple of arm-chairs, a writing-table, and a big steel safe. In one corner was another door than the en-

trance one, partly concealed by a green curtain hanging from a brass rod.

Helzephron himself sat opposite. The handsome, hawk-like face was badly bruised. He stared at me with concentrated malignancy. Then he smiled, with a flash of large white teeth.

"Really, I should hardly have known you," he said.

"I should have recognized you anywhere, even with the bruises!" I replied. "Mr. Ashton left you your teeth, I see."

His face grew dark. He nodded twice. "I thought that," he said, half to himself.

"I saw the whole thing, and it was most amusing, Mr. Helzephron. I was sitting in the smaller arm of the gallery at the 'Mille Colonnes,' behind a centerpiece of flowers. I, *and my companion,* had concealed a periscope in the flowers, and got the whole thing framed, as it were. It gave a zest to the Burgundy. But I thought you'd have made a better fight of it!"

The man leapt from his chair with a savage curse and took two steps towards me, with clenched first and lifted arm.

I looked up in that convulsed and purple face. "Quite so!" I said quietly. "I'm tied up. It's quite safe to hit me."

If he was going to torture me, and I had few illusions on the matter, I was having my innings now. He *had* been a gentleman once, he had been a brave

soldier. It was because I knew this that I could stab him.

He didn't strike. He began to walk up and down the room, swallowing his rage with an almost superhuman effort—being what he was. Perhaps shame helped him, perhaps it was cunning, but he sat down again, and though he trembled, his voice was calm.

"So you think me a coward, do you?" he said. "I'll do you the justice to say that you're none."

My mind was working with an insight that it has never possessed before or since. The key to the man's psychology was in my hand at last.

All criminals are vain. In great criminals vanity assumes colossal proportions until it becomes a real madness. Criminologists call it megalomania. It is egotism fostered and indulged to the point of monstrosity, when all moral considerations are swept away, and the subject thinks himself superior to all law, and glories in his greatness.

Lord of himself, that heritage of woe! I think Byron said that.

"You've correctly expressed me," I told him.

"Perhaps your detective work has not gone so far as to inform you that I hold the Victoria Cross?" Yes! he was mad! No sane man of his extraction would have said that.

"It is a distinction above all others, Mr. Helzephron. And you'll have another very soon. Indeed, you'll

never be forgotten. You'll be historic as the one V.C. who was degraded. They'll do it the day before they hang you at Pentonville, and it will be in the *Gazette.*"

He grew quite white, whether from anger or shame I do not know. But I went on. Something inside me that was not myself seemed to be speaking.

"You've been living quite an artificial life, you see, surrounded by your amicable young friends and the artistic Mr. Vargus. You, no doubt, think of yourself as of a very glorious order. Making war on society, Ajax defying the thunder, King of the air, and all that sort of thing. I'll bet anything you've compared yourself to Napoleon a thousand times! It's the way the late Kaiser of Germany fell. It's called megalomania. But you aren't anything of the sort, you know. You are a cowardly thief, who steals and murders for the sake of his pocket. You asked me a question and I've answered it."

He heard each word. His eyes became glassy and his jaw dropped. For all the world he was like an evil child who hears the truth about itself, and all the power was wiped out of his face as chalk marks are wiped off a blackboard.

He got up abruptly, and left the room by the curtained door. He was away for ten minutes. When he returned he was his old self, but with an addition—he had been drinking back his devilishness. There was

a strong odor of brandy as he entered. His eyes were full and liquid, and he was amazingly vital. I knew that I could hurt him no longer. He wore impenetrable armor. He sat down and lit a cigarette. He smiled with an evil good-humor. It was his hour now.

"Well, we've got acquainted at last," he began in an easy conversational tone. "You've been excessively clever in hunting me down, and your powers of insult are exceptional. I admit again that you have smoked me out here, but as to putting an end to my activities, that's a very different story. Your people can't get at me once I'm out of this snug retreat, and they can't force an entry here until I'm gone. So much as between the Commissioner of Police and the Pirate. You've had your say and I've had mine."

"Then there is nothing more to be said."

"Excuse me, as man to man, there's a good deal. I purchased an evening paper on the afternoon of the evening when I was attacked by your hired bully."

At last the conversation was growing interesting.

"With stolen money?" I asked impudently. But it fell dead flat. I don't think he even heard me.

"The paper made public some news that I had already gathered from another source. The news of your engagement, Sir John Custance."

We stared at each other in dead silence for half a minute.

"To Miss Constance Shepherd," he went on.

I said nothing.

". . . Who at this moment is not twenty yards away from you, and who will fly with me to-night to where all your police boats will never find us."

"By force."

"Well, up to the present I admit that I have had to take the law into my own hands. I am a man who believes in getting what he wants. Your arrival, the fact that you're my guest for a short time, has given my thoughts quite a new direction."

I saw that there was a deep and sinister meaning in what he said, but not an inkling of the abominable truth came to me. He understood that from my face, and he laughed out loud.

"Oh, this is going to be enormously refreshing!" he cried. "This is going to make everything worth while!"

My heart turned to stone as I watched that unholy merriment.

When he had finished laughing, he said: "Miss Shepherd does not know as yet that I have the honor of entertaining you. I am about to inform her. And then, if she wishes it, as no doubt she will, you must really meet. Journeys end in lovers' meetings, they say."

He was about to add something when there was a knock at the door. Mr. Vargus came in.

"All loaded," he said, looking nervously at me, as if wondering what had passed during his absence. "All loaded and everything ready for a start. The others have gone up to the house."

"Well, there's nothing to report, or they would have telephoned down. There is no hurry for an hour yet. . . ."

Helzephron took the short man by the arm and drew him into a corner of the room. They whispered together for nearly ten minutes. I could not catch a word.

Then Vargus nodded with an air of triumphant comprehension, and left the room.

"On second thoughts," said Helzephron, "I am not going to prepare Miss Shepherd. We will let it be in the nature of a pleasant surprise."

He disappeared through the green-curtained door.

CHAPTER XV

LED OUT TO DIE

IN relating what is immediately to follow I shall do so with as plain and unvarnished a narrative as my pen can command. You will read of what Constance and I endured, but do not ask me to do more than hint at the anger of my soul. It is impossible to describe, at least it would require the pen of a Dante or a Milton, nor would I describe it if I could. It is bad enough to live that hour again even faintly and in imagination. To call it up into full memory—soul memory—is a task for which I have not the least inclination. You shall, therefore, have the facts with very little comment upon them.

I think it's about all you'll need.

Helzephron was away for a considerable time. During his absence Vargus peeped in once and looked at me. I won't describe his face.

When the hawk-faced man returned, he dragged my chair to the far end of the room, and pushed the writing-table in front of it to form a barrier. There was a deliberation in all he did that was inexpressibly

alarming. His lips were drawn in a tight smile, so that I could see the teeth. . . .

He set a chair over against the wall opposite, and then he went again through the curtained door. A moment afterwards he entered, followed by Connie.

The room grew whirlingly dark and cleared. I could not speak, for my throat seemed to be closing up, but I saw my girl very distinctly.

She was, as I had never seen her, deadly pale, with large, dark rings under her eyes and all the joy of life ironed out of her sweet face. Yet she was not thinner and there were no lines. The color had gone from her cheeks and the luster from her hair, but I somehow thought that her physical health had not suffered alarmingly.

When she spoke I knew that this was true, and I knew why. Her indomitable spirit remained. The sunny courage of the past had condensed within her soul and turned to unconquerable purpose. Her voice was so full of scorn that it cut even me like the lash of a whip. It was a marvel that the tall man could have borne it for a moment.

But his eyes had a red light in them, like the eyes of a hound—mad.

"What new devilry is this?" the girl said, as her eyes fell upon me, trussed up there behind the table. "Do you suppose that I want any further evidence to tell me from where you come and whom you serve?"

"Look at this gentleman; look at him well."

"Another of your unhappy prisoners! So you add torture to your crimes. And you dare to make me witness it!"

She turned in a fury of disgust and loathing, and made a step towards the door. But before she moved further—God bless her!—she said: "You have fallen into the hands of a very horrid scoundrel, sir, but . . ."

At that I managed to cry out: "Connie, dearest, don't you know me?"

I ought not to have been so sudden. I cursed myself for it. It was just as if I had struck her down, for she reeled, and fell into the chair in a swoon.

I myself was near to it. There was a rush as of cataracts, a sensation of drowning. When I recovered, the maid, Wilson, was ministering to her mistress; there was a sound of pouring liquid, though I could see nothing, for Helzephron stood directly in front of me, watching what went on.

"Look here, Helzephron," I said hoarsely. "This *can't* go on. For God's sake stop it! Get her away before she recovers and do what you like to me." I thought desperately for something that would move him.

He turned round slowly. "Too late now," he said slowly. "You've got to go through with it, both of you."

The malice had faded out of his eyes. He spoke dreamily: "There is no other way. . . ."

He moved away and leant against the wall at the side, looking down moodily at Constance, who was coming to herself. Her eyes opened, and Helzephron made an impatient gesture with his arm. The maid, Wilson, vanished like a ghost. I could see that she, poor thing, went in terrible fear.

I spoke out directly I thought Connie could understand. I was desperately determined to have my say. It might be the last chance. To my surprise, though I soon understood the reason, Helzephron did not interrupt.

"Yes, it is I, Constance. I'm disguised; that is why you didn't know me. Darling, it's going to be all right. Be brave a little longer!"

I saw comprehension dawn in her eyes, and then they blazed out into love. "John! You've come at last. It's been weary waiting. But you are tied up." Her voice changed. "You're in the power of this man, too!"

"For this moment I may be; but that is nothing. He is tracked down and his hour has come. He knows it. I made a mistake and he captured me, but outside the forces are converging, and for him the whole world is now no wider than this little room."

Helzephron made no sign. From his great height

he stared down at us like a stone figure. I doubt if he either saw or heard.

"Tell me quickly—he has not ill-used you, he has not laid hands on you, hurt you. . . ."

A bitter laugh burst from her. "He has stolen me away from life and kept me here a prisoner. But there has been food to eat, and the cage is gilded with the proceeds of his thefts. He knows well enough that if he dared to touch me I should kill myself. No power on earth and none of his cunning precautions could prevent it, and that also he knows. Thank God his time has come."

"Tell me everything, quickly. A lot depends on it." How could I explain that he was going to kill me, that he could and would do so long before there was any chance of help arriving?

"He has dared," she said, and I never knew that a woman's voice could be so hard, "dared to offer me what he calls love. The word is hideous in such a mouth. He has raved, threatened and implored me to—to marry him—to fly away with him and be his wife."

She shuddered terribly and sank back in the chair, as if exhausted. I racked my brains for words. What could I say or do? That she would kill herself rather than yield an inch I was certain. But he could still prolong her torture. The chances were that he would get away in his marvelous ship for a

time. On the other hand, it might well be that the searching airships were in such force by now that even the Pirate Ship could not escape. There would be a battle in the air. She would be shot to pieces by our cruisers' heavy guns. And Connie would be on board. . . .

What could I say?

Helzephron stood up from the wall. With slow movements he lit a cigarette, but his hand was trembling as if in a palsy. He spoke to Constance.

"You have already told me that you love Sir John Custance," he said. "I heard that from your own lips two days ago. But 'love' means many things. And you may well have said it to keep me at arm's length. Sir John Custance is here now, and in my power. What of him and you?"

Connie looked at him for a moment without a word. There was not a trace of fear in her eyes. "I will tell you," she said at length. "That man is my man, and I am his woman from now until the end of time and for all eternity. You cannot understand, I know. But if words have meaning, mine are plain enough."

Helzephron suddenly threw away his cigarette and gave what seemed to be a sigh of relief. The sound, the gesture, were startling. I could not understand. . . .

"Well," he said, "that is another, and the last, illusion gone. My life has been a succession of lost

illusions, I think. I loved you, and I love you still, with all the force and power of a nature which, whatever else it may be, is stronger than that of most men in this feeble world. I would have given you a love so rich, abundant and wonderful that you would have forgotten your passion for this man. Mine would have consumed it utterly. And you would have responded. You think not, but I know better. It would have been flame and flame, LOVE. Now I see that it is indeed too late."

His tones were not raised; there was nothing particularly eloquent in the actual words he spoke. But to me they tolled like a great bell—a bell that tolls while the iron gates of hell are opening slowly. . . .

"Yes, too late!" Connie said quickly. "And you see it now! It could never have been. And now you will let us go! Oh, be quick! Untie John, please do; it must be hurting him so!"

For the first and last time that night two tears rolled down my cheeks.

I suppose that for a brief space there had been some lingering nobility in Helzephron's mind, some flicker of life in that dark soul. The man had not always been under the dominion of evil.

But now I saw, without possibility of mistake, the final eclipse of good. It was a visible thing, the last awful act in the terrible drama of his life, and it took

place before one's eyes like crystals dissolving in a glass.

He looked steadfastly at Constance.

"Sir John can go," he said, "for all the debt of ill-will I owe him, he can go from here unharmed. My dear girl, it rests entirely with you!"

She did not understand.

"Oh, then let him go now, at once."

"That man," he answered, "lives, or dies a peculiarly unpleasant death; goes free, or in nothing but a heap of clothes in half an hour, as you shall decide, Constance."

By the slow dilation of her eyes, I think she knew what he would say.

"It is like this," he went on. "If I cannot have Love, the real thing, at least Fate has put it in my power to demand—and have!—the second best, the semblance of it. The moment that you give me your solemn promise to marry me, Sir John walks out on to the moor."

I gave Constance one swift, warning look. Would the man believe that another was as base as he himself? Everything depended on that.

"You cannot do it, Constance," I said, with a careful tremor in my voice, trying to suggest a slight dawn of hope, and again I sent her a signal of caution.

Helzephron gave an almost imperceptible start, and a faint smile began to play about his cruel lips.

The fish was rising.

"It would be a martyrdom," I went on. "What is my life worth—even to the State"—I thought that was a clever touch—"in exchange for such a sacrifice?"

Praise God for her quick wits! She saw that I was acting, and feel into her part with supreme naturalness. A wail of pain came from her, and she covered her face with her hands. "I cannot let you die," she cried. "Do I not love you? Is not your life of supreme value?"

I spoke in a tone of hardly veiled eagerness: "But your own happiness, what of that?"

Connie made a passionate gesture of renunciation. She turned to our torturer. "Sir," she said, "have you no mercy, no compassion?"

"I have nothing but one overmastering need."

"Then leave us. Let me be alone with Sir John for a few minutes." She beckoned to him and he came, leaning his head low.

"Go," she whispered. "I cannot persuade him while you are here. Leave us alone and I will do my best."

The fool was wax in her hands. That one confidential whisper seemed to have transformed him.

"Yes, I'll go," he said, but I heard every word.

"I don't think our friend will take much persuading! You may be glad to marry a *man,* after all!"

He was half-way to the door when suspicion took hold of him. "How do I know that you won't be up to some trick?" he snarled; "try to loose him or something? Not that there would be any chance of escape if you did."

"I give you my word of honor," Connie answered, "or you can tie me up, too. That would be the best way. Fasten me in this chair so that I can't move."

Helzephron shook his head impatiently. Then the door banged and we were alone.

I began to speak at once. There was no time to waste.

"Dearest, it is good-by. We have managed to snatch these few moments for farewell."

Her face shone with love and courage as she smiled at me. "Is there no way, darling?"

"None. This is the end. We have fooled that devil for a minute. When he returns and finds out the end will come quickly. Now, listen. . . ."

In a few sentences I told her exactly how matters stood, and of my certainty that Helzephron's course was almost run. Nor did I disguise from her that in any attack upon the Pirate Ship her own fate was sure.

"What does it matter? I should kill myself, any-

how, rather than submit to one touch from him. I have the means ready. Oh, my love, I am prouder of you at this moment than I ever was!"

How I rejoiced in her! Never for a single instant had she believed that I would let her do this thing. It was not even spoken of between us. It was worth while dying for love and trust like this!

"And you see, dear love," she went on, "it will not be long. We shall be together again in a few hours, never to part any more. . . ."

Very solemnly and quietly we said farewell. Neither of us was unhappy. A great exaltation and peace consoled us, but the moment is too sacred for description here.

I gave one last look at her serene and radiant face, striving to image it upon my brain, so that it should be the last thing I saw, and then I called for Helzephron with a strong voice.

From the first instant that he stepped into the room and saw our faces, he knew the truth.

He was very quiet, but his eyes shone again with the dull red light that you may sometimes see in a dog's eyes. One could almost have pitied him, for he was as one who desired even one drop of living water to cool his tongue and was tormented in a flame.

I was praying hard for one boon—that Constance should not see me die. It seemed that my prayer was

answered, for he led her roughly to the curtained door and pushed her through.

He whistled, and Vargus came in through the other door. The movements of both men were detached and business-like. I had the odd fancy that this was exactly how the paid executioner goes about his work in the prisons.

Once more the cloth was tied over my head, the chair was lifted, and I was carried away. The swinging motion lasted a long time. I must have been taken a considerable distance from the room of my agony when the chair was finally set down. I heard the plangent beating of waves and felt cool airs. I was in the central cavern once more, and near to the mouth of it. So that was it! They were going to throw me to the whirlpools and the rocks below! . . .

I felt strong and slender fingers about my neck—Vargus the pianist!—and shuddered at the contact. The cloth was removed. It was as I thought: all round was the cathedral-like cave, but now dozens of lights were turned on, including a great blue arc-lamp suspended from the roof, and all the shadows and mystery were gone.

Not far away, resting upon rubber-covered wheels, which were dropped below the floats by an adaptation of the Raynor-Wallis patent, was the great Pirate Ship, towering up under the domed roof, spreading her great planes from side to side, lovely in her lines,

an awful instrument of power. Even at that supreme moment I longed to examine her, to go aboard and make acquaintance with the wonders she held.

The ruling passion of a man's life dies hard!

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOUNDS FROM TIBET AND MR. VARGUS; WITH A DISCOVERY ON BOARD THE PIRATE

THEY turned my chair so that I faced the mouth of the cave, which was some thirty yards away. The moon had set. The short summer night was over, and the first gray hint of the dawn, that I should never see, was near.

Helzephron sat down on a stool a few yards away from me. His back was to the cavern mouth. He spoke a word to Vargus, who padded away behind me.

"Why are we waiting?" I said.

"Because you had the misfortune to hear my friend Vargus pouring his soul out at the piano, Sir John."

"I am still rather in the dark."

"I have no objection to satisfying a curiosity which is legitimate under the circumstances. I was going to put a pistol to your ear and throw you into the cove. But Mr. Vargus has fantastic tastes, and you have put his back up. He asked me a favor, and as I owe him a good deal, I could not refuse it. But I see he is returning. You shall have a concrete explanation."

From somewhere behind me I heard the padding of footsteps, accompanied by a curious scuffling noise and the sound of heavy breathing. Then Helzephron gave a short bark of laughter, and Vargus came round the chair.

Then I knew.

On leather leashes Vargus held two monstrous dogs. Each one was as big as a newly born calf. They were like Newfoundlands, and yet unlike, for there was a great bull-dog jowl to each. . . .

"My Tibetan mastiffs," said Helzephron. "Death by dogs for a dog!"

Vargus brought the brutes within two yards of me. Their teeth were bared, their hackles rose, there was the dull red light in their eyes, too, but not a sound came from either.

Both men watched me intently, but they got none of the satisfaction that they hoped. It was simply that the bitterness of death was over. That was all. Fear was something that I was no longer capable of feeling. To be worried to death by mastiffs was just like any other death, then. I understood how it was that martyrs for religion, or any cause in which they believed, died so quietly.

Helzephron cursed deeply. "Get it over," he said. "Take the dogs to the far end of the cave. When I blow this whistle let them go. You'll hear them run-

ning up behind you, Sir John," he said, with an insane chuckle.

Vargus disappeared.

I stared out at the cave mouth. Each moment it grew lighter. I thought that I should have liked to have seen one more summer dawn. But Helzephron was lifting his whistle; and then the mouth of the cave seemed to recede and shrink to the size of a mere window.

A mere window. With idle curiosity I saw how a fat spider was slowly descending his swinging thread, and I was a child again, seated at the nursery window. . . .

The whistle blew a shrill, echoing blast.

At once my mind awoke to full consciousness, and I braced myself to die without a cry. The cave mouth became itself again, and the spider . . .

Hanging by one arm and a leg, half-way down a stout rope, was a short, thick-set figure. . . .

As the rapid thud of the racing dogs grew loud the figure's right arm raised itself.

Bang! Crash! Bang! Crash! a wild howl of pain, thunderous echoes rolling down the cavern, and Helzephron on his feet in time to see something bounding towards him like an india-rubber ball.

I knew who that was. I had one glimpse of a terrible grinning face as Danjuro leapt at the hawk-faced man; heard a strangled scream and a long, crunching

crack, and saw two whirling figures crash to the floor.

I can't express the suddenness of it all. Before my brain could register the impression, another person was sprinting by me, yelling like a fiend. Then Danjuro rose from the floor—alone—and my ropes were being divided, my stiff limbs rubbed, and a calm, exultant voice remarked: "Exit Honorable Helzephron."

I began to laugh weakly.

"You were just in time, Danjuro. Have you killed him?"

He was about to reply when there was a diversion.

Charles Thumbwood appeared. He had Mr. Vargus by the collar, and was kicking him along to the accompaniment of flowers of language that I shall not attempt to reproduce.

"Caught 'im at the telephone," gasped Charles. "Gr-r-r, you little swine"—a furious kick—"Gr-r-r, you slime-lapping leper you! 'E was telephoning to 'is friends, Sir John. Thank Gawd we come in time, Sir John! Gr-r-r, there's one as you won't forget in an 'urry!" and lifting Mr. Vargus several inches from the floor with a final kick, Little Thumbwood flung him away, began to feel me all over with trembling hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

But I had caught his words. The telephone! We should have all the band upon us in two minutes, desperate and fighting for their lives.

"Quick!" I shouted, "follow me. We must get Miss Shepherd safe. There isn't a moment to lose."

I don't know how I did it, and the first few yards were like running on red-hot plowshares; but I got going, and raced down the great cave, past the Pirate Ship, to the door at the end.

I noticed a door on the left as I ran. It was the one by which I had first entered, the one that marked the passage leading to the lift.

"Block that somehow!" I called to Thumbwood. "It may keep them back for a minute or two. Shoot anyone who breaks through."

He understood and stopped at once. I saw him dragging up some cases to make cover and lying down behind them, as I turned just outside the door which led to the ante-room to Helzephron's private sanctum.

. . . We found Constance upon her knees in a richly furnished room. Her maid, Wilson, was weeping and trembling in a corner. As we burst in she shrieked with terror.

But Constance fainted dead away.

I took that unfortunate woman, Wilson, and shook her into sanity. There was nothing else to be done, and I remember that it seemed quite natural and obvious at the time. I knew that we hadn't a moment to lose, and I was in a state of abnormal excitement.

When she had regained some sort of control, which was in less than a minute, I ordered her to attend to

Constance, and, when she came to herself, to tell her that we were all saved and Helzephron was powerless. Then I hurried out into the cave.

Danjuro and Thumbwood were working like demons. Piles of boxes and other impedimenta had been erected in two strategic positions commanding the door. Behind each pile were two or three automatic rifles and many clips of ammunition. Just as I came up Danjuro went to the door and opened it wide.

I grasped his idea at once. As you may remember from my former description, the passage was a mere cleft in the rock. Certainly not more than one man could walk abreast, and he could be shot down the moment he turned the corner. A child who could shoot straight would have been able to hold the passage, and behind the barrier on the floor of the cave would have been safe enough.

"I trust honorable lady quite safe?" said Danjuro in his quiet, silky voice.

"Yes; the maid's attending to her. Thank God that unutterable scoundrel has not harmed her."

Then I remembered something. Danjuro's face was perfectly placid and ordinary. The grinning devil-mask had vanished as if it had never been. To look at him no one would have guessed that he was anything but a peaceable little Eastern student, such as you may see by the dozen any day round about the Law Courts in town. He rolled a cigarette in his

conjuring way as I spoke, and yet a few moments ago those slender hands had just broken the neck of the Master Criminal of Europe!

"Look here, old chap," I said. "I haven't had a moment to thank you. You and Charles arrived in the very nick of time. A few seconds more and I should have been done for; and as for Miss Shepherd . . ."

I couldn't go on. I just held out my hand.

He didn't take it—cold-blooded little beggar! He just bowed politely and murmured something that sounded like "Glad to be of any help!" Then he brightened up. "I think, Sir John," he said, "that we can reckon ourselves as quite safe from any intrusion now!" and he waved his hand towards the open door.

"Let 'em all come!" remarked Thumbwood.

Then, quite suddenly, the floor of the cave seemed to heave up and down. The great arc lights which made it as bright as day began to wheel round like fireworks, and I fainted for the second time.

When I recovered it was to find myself in the late Helzephron's own room. Something cold was on my forehead and something chilly and scented trickled down my face. I opened my eyes, and Constance was kneeling by my side.

"My love, my dear love!" she whispered. "I never

thought that I should see you alive again. Oh, thank God, thank God!"

Then her arms were round me, and for a long time we spoke no word. I think I know what the man who was called back from death in Palestine long ago must have felt. . . .

She gave me food and wine, and at last, though I felt physically weak and shaken, my mind worked again, and I stood up. We were alone in the room, and no sound came from outside, so I concluded that all was safe for the present.

"A little Japanese carried you in here," Connie said, "as easily as if you were a child. I had just come to myself, and I thought, oh, John, I thought that you had been killed, and that he was one of those awful people. But he shouted out at once that what Wilson said was true and we were saved. I believed him, in spite of the shock his appearance gave me at first, and when he had put you down gently in this chair he hurried away. John, who is he, and how are we saved?"

"We owe everything to him," I answered gravely. "He killed Helzephron with his own hands"—I did not tell her about the dogs just then—"and in a few hours we shall be back in the world. We can never, as long as we live, pay our debt to Danjuro."

In as short a time as I could, I explained everything to her, from the first moment when I had heard

of her capture until now. I walked about the room as I did so, and new life flowed into my cramped limbs. When I had smoked a cigarette, I felt almost normal again.

"Now, dear," I said, when my story was over, "we aren't exactly out of the wood yet, though there's nothing whatever to be alarmed at. Go into your own room and collect your things together; whatever you want to take away with you. Stay here with Wilson till I come again. I may be some time. There are a good many things to straighten out."

One more embrace and I left her, sobbing with great happiness, and, passing through the ante-room, hurried out into the great cave.

My first glance was towards the door of the rock passage leading to the lift. It was still open. Sitting on the barrier twelve yards or so away was Thumbwood. A rifle lay across his knees and he was placidly smoking his pipe.

"All right?" I shouted.

"All O.K., Sir John," he answered, standing up. "Not a sign of anyone. As a matter of fact, Mr. Danjuro and me have ascertained that this 'ere dog-fancier 'adn't time to get through to his friends upstairs. I got 'old of 'im just as he was topping the fence."

I followed his glance, and I saw Mr. Vargus, trussed like a fowl, on the floor a yard or two away.

I had quite forgotten that ingenious and artistic person, and I started. He was a sorry sight enough, dirty, blood-stained and horrible, as his pale, wicked face stared up at me. He said nothing, and I shuddered as I looked at him—shuddered as I had never done at Helzephron.

"Where's Mr. Danjuro?" I asked.

"Up at the mouth of the cave, Sir John. I was to send you to him directly you came."

I nodded, turned, and began to walk up the great cave. The Pirate Airship lay there, gleaming and wonderful. There was a light steel ladder at her side as I passed, leading up into the fuselage, and it was only by a strong effort of will that I could keep myself from mounting it and exploring the mechanical marvels that I knew she contained. However, I resisted the temptation and hurried on. The lights depending from the roof grew dimmer each moment as I drew near the curving entrance. "It must be full day outside," I thought, as the fresh sea-air came to meet me, and then, as I turned round the bend, I saw the squat, black figure of the Japanese silhouetted against the rosy fires of sunrise.

Danjuro was standing motionless. He was looking down at some humped objects upon the ground. The rope, like a wisp of spider's web, swung gently to and fro. There was not a sound save the soft murmur of the sea far down below.

"I'm all right now," I said, and he turned to me without a start, though he could not have heard me coming.

His face was calm, but wrinkled up in every direction. He looked like a man of immense age, and his narrow eyes were full of brooding, somber light. Almost at his feet lay the body of Helzephron. It had been decently disposed with the hands upon the breast, and the morning light played over the hawk-like, bronzed face and open eyes in which there was now no cruelty.

The dead man was august as he lay there. There was a certain nobility about the features. He did not look like a scoundrel, and all resentment and hate passed away from me for ever as I looked at him.

The two huge dogs, one with a bullet through its brain, the other shot in the chest and through the heart as it was in the act of leaping, were hideous objects. . . .

When I looked up again the wrinkles had gone from Danjuro's face, the somber expression from his eyes. It was a magical change, but I was long past wonder at anything in connection with him.

"We will have those dogs skinned," he remarked in his ordinary voice. "They will make a fine rug for your house, Sir John."

"No doubt; but we've got to get out of this first. Remember that there are a dozen desperate scoundrels

not far away. And I don't see either Miss Shepherd or myself returning to the world up that rope! By the way, I haven't heard how you managed to get here in time."

He told me the story shortly enough. There was not an unnecessary detail and no comment whatever. Thumbwood supplied the lacking picturesqueness some days later. But even as Danjuro told it, I realized the marvelous sagacity and contempt of danger that had saved us.

It seemed that when he had arrived at Zerran, the idea of a cave, either natural or enlarged by pretended mining operations, was already in his mind. As soon as I had left the inn on my expedition, Danjuro and Thumbwood had taken one of Trewhella's boats and set out eastwards along the coast. The Japanese had already taken his bearings, and knew that Tregeraint House would be a little to the left of the jagged peak of Carne Zerran. They cruised along into the moonlight until they picked up their mark, and not two hundred yards further on struck the entrance to the S-shaped cove. Then Danjuro had no longer any doubts. No boat could live in that cauldron of the waves, but it seemed a man could, for our rescuers proved it!

He stripped and went in—I learnt afterwards that he was as much at home in the water as a seal, and, of course, like so many of his countrymen, he was

simply a mass of steel muscles. In twenty minutes the secret was a secret no longer.

Danjuro's next move was to row back to Zerran Cove at top speed, and hasten up the cliff path to the inn. Here he disinterred the coastguard from the pigsty and roused him to immediate action.

Ropes and crowbars were procured, the fenced-off "dangerous" area on the cliff-top invaded, and Danjuro, with Charles, descended in the nick of time. But there was more than this. The coastguard had his orders. Directly the two men disappeared over the brink he was instructed to make all haste to the watch-house, some two miles away in the direction of St. Ives. From there the Chief Boatswain was to telephone all along the coast to the various stations, and also to the police at St. Ives, Camborne and Penzance.

"In three or four hours, perhaps sooner," Danjuro concluded, "an armed force should be concentrating on the moors upon the house above. The pirates will be desperate, and will put up a fight—at least, I think so, but the end is certain."

"And meantime, all we can do is to wait here until something happens?"

"That is as you please, Sir John," he answered, looking at me curiously.

For a minute I did not see what he meant, but then a great idea dawned upon me.

"The Pirate Ship!" I burst out.

"I have always heard that Sir John Custance is a skilled pilot," he said with a bow.

I saw it all clearly. There was a gorgeous, dramatic end to it all well within my grasp! It would be something to make the whole world gasp! The Pirate Ship was, I knew, already loaded with the proceeds of the pirates' robberies. It was not only full of loot, but prepared in every way for a long cruise. Helzephron and his ruffians had planned an almost immediate escape from the cave to some new refuge of which I had heard them speak. Doubtless, if things had gone right with them, they would have been off by now, with my mangled body tossed in the whirlpools below and Constance still a prisoner. Helzephron would have mounted to a great height, and trusted to his immense superiority in speed over all the airships in existence for escape. I have little doubt that, had things fallen out as he planned, he would have been able to carry out his scheme. But God disposes. . . .

There was nothing, so I thought at the moment, to prevent *me* from piloting the airship out of its lair. Once in the sky I could make a bee-line for Plymouth, and get there in a little more than half an hour—if it was indeed true that the mysterious ship could do her two hundred and forty M.P.H. To swoop down to Plymouth sea-drome with Constance, the Pirate Ship and the recovered treasure! That

would, indeed, be a triumph such as is given to few men to experience. I have a fairly vivid imagination, and I saw it all in one radiant picture.

"Let's go and have a look at the ship at once," I said, and almost ran back into the cavern, where she towered up and threw black velvet shadows in the fierce blue light that streamed down from the suspended arcs. Danjuro followed.

As I swung myself over the side and descended a short ladder, I found myself in a roomy main cabin. A switch to my hand illuminated it, and even then I saw that the ship had been designed by a master hand. Below the port-holes, filled with toughened glass and provided with shutters of a design that was new to me, ran a continuous seat of woven camels' hair cord, easily convertible into sleeping bunks for half a dozen people. There was an electric stove of polished aluminium for cooking, and an electric radiator for warming the cabin, clustering round a central supporting column. I saw also that there was a very complete telephone installation connecting this main cabin with the pilot's room forward.

Under the seats was a collection of wooden cases and a box of japanned steel, which I judged, and rightly, contained the treasure taken from the *Albatros* and the *Alantis*. A sliding door aft led into a storeroom, which seemed to contain everything necessary for a cruise of several days. I noticed boxes of ex-

pensive cigars, bottles of whisky and liqueurs, tinned oysters, larks, asparagus, such as wealthy yachtsmen provide themselves with. The dogs did themselves well!

Leading out of this was a final cabin fitted with tools of every sort, a rack of automatic rifles and pistols, and several thousand rounds of small-arms ammunition. Here also, with a padded door, was a little compartment for the wireless operator, and I pictured one of the black-hearted scoundrels sitting there and picking up the messages from airships of the trade routes with a grin upon his face.

Danjuro came with me and looked about him quickly, but with no change of expression. "So far, so good," I said to him; "but all this is unimportant, really, though it is very complete. What really matters is the pilot's cabin, the engines, controlling gear, petrol supply and so on. Let's go forward. Do you understand anything about airships?"

"A very little, Sir John," he replied, and—so petty are we all at times—I felt a perceptible thrill of pleasure at hearing there was at least something of which this paragon was ignorant.

"Never had occasion to study them?" I asked, as we passed again through the main cabin.

"I have watched the pilot in Honorable Van Adams' yacht the *May Flower,* but that is all. . . ."

I hardly heard him, for I was in the pilot's room at last.

I saw at a glance that here were a number of things absolutely new to me, and so to all the aviators of the world. I am not going to be technical. This narrative is written for the general reader, and my expert conclusions have been published elsewhere. I can but indicate some of the wonders of mechanical skill with which I was confronted.

For instance, the designer of the ship was the first man to solve the problem of easy control. Up to the present all pilots had controlled their ships—the movements of planes and rudders, etc.—with a certain amount of manual labor. It is true that recent inventions had minimized this; ball-bearings, the rack and pinion, had made the main control levers and wheels much easier to move than they were in the old days of the Great War—when flying first began to come into its own. But there was still a great deal of physical strain, which greatly lessened efficiency upon a long cruise. Moreover, the instant decision necessary to be taken by an aviator—when a fraction of a second may spell safety or ruin—had been always hampered by the comparative mechanical slowness of control.

In the Pirate Ship this disability did not exist. Just as the largest ocean-going liner—sea-ship, not airship, I mean—can be steered by a wheel not more

than two feet in diameter by the invention of the steam steering gear, so the Pirate Ship was controlled by a series of little wheels and levers, covered with leather, that looked like toys.

Electricity had been brought into play, and a touch of the pilot's hand was magnified into power that in an instant would deflect a mighty lifting plane or vast rudder.

The fuel capacity of the ship was immense. She carried as much petrol, in the huge and ingeniously contrived tanks below the fuselage, as one of the great air-liners, though she was not a fifth of the size. I saw at once that she could keep the air for days.

Examining the cockpit, in which two quick-firing guns were placed, I found them both of the very latest pattern, and mounted with a swivel device that was far in advance of anything attempted hitherto. Only the great battle-planes of the world's air navies could mount guns of such power, and she could circle round them with ease while in full flight.

But it was when I mounted to the little deck above, and began to examine the two huge six-cylinder engines, that my admiration and interest grew beyond all bounds. The chief triumph of all, the silencing mechanism that reduced the ordinary roar of air engines to no more than the hum of a dynamo, did not at once become clear. It would have been necessary to take the machines to pieces to have discovered

everything; but an examination of the exhausts put me on the track, and I marveled at the creation of a master-mind.

I was looking at the twin propellers, which had a curve that was new to me, and even material that I could not immediately define, when Danjuro hailed me from the pilot's room.

I tumbled down to find the little man bending over the various controls ranged in front of the pilot's seat.

"It seems to me, Sir John," he said, "pray correct me if I am wrong, that there is something wanting here. I know little about airships, but something of electricity, and can quite understand this system. But it seems to me that a key-part of the mechanism has been removed."

He pulled over a lever a few inches long. Its movement should have been registered upon a dial above, but the needle never moved.

"Do that again!" I cried, and, mounting a step, put my head into the little dome of glass in the cabin roof which commanded the whole length of the ship. One of the tilting planes by the rudder should have moved when the lever was pulled over.

It remained motionless.

"One of the honorable gentlemen upstairs has got a small but very essential piece of linking apparatus in his pocket," said Danjuro.

It was only too true. A moment's reflection satisfied me of that, and I stared blankly at my companion.

My gorgeous, if somewhat vainglorious, plan was knocked on the head.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MOMENT OF TRIUMPH

I DESCENDED from the airship in silence. Danjuro followed me. Thumbwood was still on guard. The bundle that was Mr. Vargus lay upon the ground, and a face like a white wedge of venom stared up at us. There was no sign of the enemy, but I felt that we should not be left in peace much longer, and my disappointment at the discovery on board the pirate was keen.

"There is still a chance," Danjuro whispered in my ear. "And with your permission, Sir John, I am going to try it."

I nodded, and he stepped up to Vargus and pulled him up into a sitting posture, propping him against the barrier.

"There is a part of the control mechanism of the airship missing," Danjuro said, with silky politeness.

Vargus grinned suddenly, a momentary rictus that came and went, utterly horrible.

"And we want that piece of the machine," the Japanese went on.

Vargus spoke, in his peculiar oily voice. "Then you may go on wanting, you putty-faced little spawn of a monkey."

I cannot hope to describe the depth of poisonous hate the man put into the words. His accent was cultured and refined; the great dome of the blood-stained forehead spoke loudly of intellect, yet the voice somehow reeked of the pit. I know that it struck me cold, and I saw the rifle in Thumbwood's hands was shaking. Although this was the man who had devised an abominable death for me, I can honestly say that I felt no personal resentment. I can't account for it, but it was so.

I should have welcomed that, rather than the inward loathing, like a shudder of the soul, at something inhuman and unclean.

What Danjuro felt I don't know, but he didn't turn a hair.

"I think you will assist us," he said.

For answer the thing below spat in his face.

I expected to see Danjuro leap upon him and strangle him where he sat. I shouldn't have raised a finger to stop it. But it was not so. The little man stepped aside and carefully wiped his face with a silk handkerchief that seemed to come from nowhere. Then he went behind Mr. Vargus and began to feel his head all over, with quick, delicate movements of his fingers.

"How can you touch him?" I cried, hardly knowing what I said, for the thing was ugly and uncanny beyond belief. Danjuro was like some sinister phrenologist in a nightmare, feeling the bumps of a devil.

"I know now what I wanted to know about him," Danjuro purred after a moment. "I never doubted the intelligence, Sir John. It is very marked. And there is great energy and courage of a sort. But our friend who spits has one little failing. He is afraid of physical pain."

"You're not going to . . .?"

Danjuro looked me full in the eyes, and in his I saw a stony resolution that I was in no state to combat.

"I will go and see Miss Shepherd," I said, and turning on my heel, walked quickly to the inner end of the cavern. As I went I heard Danjuro ask Thumbwood for a box of matches. . . .

I am quite aware that there are lots of soft-hearted people who will say I ought never to have allowed Danjuro to do what he did. Well, they must have their own opinion, that's all. I believe it was nothing like so bad as the cat-o'-nine-tails which is constantly administered in our prisons, and under the circumstances I think it was justifiable. Call me what names you like as you read this—you have not seen Mr. Vargus and his dogs, nor spent a small eternity in the pirates' cave.

. . . Constance was wonderfully recovered. I spent

a minute or two with her, and then returned to the scene of action.

Mr. Vargus was speaking in a quick, panting voice, and these were the words I heard:

"Gascoigne, Mr. Gascoigne; he has it. He was our second pilot. It was always in his charge."

Danjuro gave his little weary smile. Then he put his hand gently upon my arm and drew me away to the other side of the cave.

"We will now summon honorable Gascoigne," he said. "He is the young gentlemen we saw with late honorable Helzephron at the 'Mille Colonnes.' The little necessary piece of the mechanism in his possession is, I have just learnt, generally referred to as 'the link.' "

"But how . . . ?" I was beginning, when he pointed to a telephone instrument upon a screen of tongue-and-groove boarding. "This communicates with the house," he whispered. "Mr. Vargus nearly got through recently, you will remember, just before the good Thumbwood caught him."

He raised the instrument to his mouth and ear.

In a second or two a bell rang and Danjuro began to speak. I nearly jumped out of my boots. The words were simple enough, but the voice with its oily refinement was the voice of Mr. Vargus!

"Is that you, Gascoigne? Yes, Vargus speaking. The Chief says you are to come down at once and

bring the control link with you. What? No, the others are to wait till they're sent for. What? Oh, yes, quite dead. I wish you could have seen it!"

It was a triumph of mimicry that I shall never forget, the more so as it was the only occasion on which I heard this marvelous man attempt anything of the sort. Heaven knows what other talents he must have possessed!

"The young gentleman was asking about you, Sir John. He seemed quite curious about your end!"

I smiled grimly. "What are you going to do?" I asked.

In answer he hurried back to the open door and crouched down in the shadow by its side. I motioned to Thumbwood to lie down behind the barrier which was exactly facing the passage, and drawing my automatic pistol, which I had regained from Helzephron's room, I retired to the opposite side of the door and outside the line of direct vision.

There was silence for a minute or so, and then, far away in the rock, I heard a hollow rumble and the clank of a gate. The lift had descended and Gascoigne was on his way. A few seconds afterwards I heard a merry whistle, fresh and sweet, as if the performer had not a care in the world. He was whistling the lilting tune of a popular song which all the street boys were singing at that time:

"Merry Maudie met her fate at Margate!"

Callous young dog! In a moment he would not be so cheerful. . . .

I had left it to that concentrated muscle, Danjuro, though I stood ready to help if necessary. But I knew that he was a supreme exponent of jiu-jitsu—*teste* the hideous death Helzephron died—and I had little fear. Indeed, I found myself looking on with a detached and interested curiosity as one might at a prize-fight. I wondered if Danjuro would kill him or not. And if you had supped so full of horrors as I had in that awful cave, you'd have felt like that, too!

. . . For a second I saw Gascoigne in the full light from the roof and framed by the archway, like a picture. It was the same young fellow, with the dissipated face, that I had seen at the restaurant, though he had not been among the singing pirates at the inn. He was extremely handsome still, with the face of a lost angel. As a boy at school he must have been beautiful.

Then the squat shadow that crouched by the lintel of the door, like a monstrous toad, expanded swiftly. Danjuro caught Gascoigne by the right hand with the speed of lightning, and pulled the arm out straight with a jerk. Then, as the young man was falling forward, the left arm of the Japanese shot out *under*

his captive's rigid right and the hand seized the lapel of Gascoigne's coat. He was powerless. If he made the slightest movement Danjuro would have broken his arm like a pipe-stem. He could not swing round and hit with his left, and I saw his mouth open with foolish amazement like the mouth of a fish, as his legs were kicked from under him, and he fell back with his assailant on the top of him.

I tied his ankles together with neatness and dispatch, while I listened to a sickening flood of blasphemous profanity that flowed from the clear-cut lips of this *ci-devant* gentleman in a ceaseless stream. More and more I realized what a crew of utter devils Helzephron had got round him.

At last he was bound, and Danjuro took from him a leather box, which he wore suspended round his shoulders by a strap. He handed it to me, and, opening it, I found it was the control link that we sought.

"You can fit that in all right, Sir John?"

"Oh, yes, I don't think it presents any difficulty."

"Very well, then, in a few minutes we will start; that is, if you think you can take the ship out of this place?"

I had already considered that and decided that I could. It was a ticklish job enough, and would require the most delicate care, especially with an untried ship. But in the past I had landed on the deck of a

moving battleship, and there were few stunts that were not familiar to me. I felt I could do it.

"I don't think I shall let you down," I said, and hurried to the ship.

Five minutes showed me that I had got the hang of the apparatus and that electrical connection was restored, and I spent a further ten in thoroughly examining and getting accustomed to the controls. Moreover, I made one new and startling discovery.

There was no need, in this marvelous ship, for mechanics to swing the propeller at the start. Again electricity from the ship's dynamo was employed, and the starting device was a miracle of ingenuity, worked from the pilot's cabin.

Mr. Vargus, though I offered to loosen his bonds at the feet, absolutely refused to walk, and Danjuro carried him up the ladder and threw him upon the floor of the cabin like a sack of corn. Gascoigne, now very white and silent, was more amenable. It seems that Vargus had acquainted him with everything that had passed as they lay together on the ground.

"I'll go all right, sir," he said to me, as I helped him to his feet.

As I had the muzzle of my pistol in the small of his back, he couldn't well do anything else, but he lost nothing by being civil.

"I can't believe that the Chief's dead and everything's finished," he said, with a curious sort of sob.

I realized that all sense of right and wrong had left this youth early. He was the true stuff of which criminals are made, incapable of putting himself in the place of his victims, and while bitterly conscious of defeat and punishment to come, incapable of remorse.

Without a trace of pose this man behaved just as if he were an officer captured by the enemy in wartime, and I dare swear he felt just like that. There is only one thing to do with these abnormals that get themselves born now and then—destroy them.

Morally I felt sure that Gascoigne was not a hundredth part so responsible as Vargus. But one was born a criminal, and, from that point of view, insane. The other had had the capabilities of sainthood, but had opened his soul to the Dweller on the Threshold and was doubly lost.

We went slowly towards the ship. "Good old bird!" he said, as any public schoolboy might have said it. "I expect this'll be the last cruise I ever take in her."

"Or in any ship at all," I answered. "I suppose you've no illusions as to what's in store for you?"

"No, I suppose it's a hanging job," he replied, and I assented, though, as you will learn, both his anticipations were to prove wrong.

Danjuro and I shifted Vargus out of the main cabin into the small one where the tools and spare

parts were stored. We didn't want Constance to see him, and he was so well secured that he couldn't possibly do any harm.

Gascoigne we left for the present on one of the seats, and I hurried to fetch the two women, passing Thumbwood, still at his post.

"Everything is arranged," I called out, as I ran through Helzephron's room. "We are going to fly to Plymouth at once in the Pirate Ship."

The maid Wilson shrieked.

"Oh, Sir John, that awful ship! I couldn't go in 'er again, not for my life. Let's go in a taxi, Miss, please 'ave a taxi; I couldn't face the ship."

"You'll lose your life quickly enough if you stay," I said to the yelping fool, though, Heaven knows, the poor soul had gone through enough to turn her mind entirely. Her mouth grew like a round O, and I was preparing for another shriek when I suddenly thought of something.

"Miss Connie will be quite safe with me," I said quickly, "and I shall put you in charge of Charles Thumbwood. You remember him? He'll look after you all right, Wilson."

It acted like a charm. I had remembered Charles's attention to the pretty maid in the train.

"Ow!" said Wilson. "Is Mr. Thumbwood here, then, Sir John?"

"Very much so. You will be his especial charge,

and the journey won't take more than three-quarters of an hour."

The girl picked up the dressing-bag, which she had dropped upon the floor. "Then that will be all right," she said with a flush, and I wondered if she thought Charles was going to pilot the ship himself. How true it is that Faith can move mountains! No doubt Constance felt just the same about me as Mary Wilson did about Charles.

. . . We had come out into the cave, and had walked a few yards towards the looming bulk of the ship, when the telephone bell on the cave-side ahead of us rang furiously. It kept on like an alarm-clock, and telling the girls to remain still for a moment, I ran up and unhooked the receiver.

A voice was bawling at the other end, so loud that the words rang and buzzed one in to the other, and I could only distinguish one or two. I heard enough to know what had happened, though.

"Chief . . . coastguard police . . . rifles . . . all round the house on the moor were coming down . . . two of us stay . . . hold till last moment. . . ."

So that was it! Billy Pengelly, the coastguard, had made good. The wires had been at work while we had been about our mole-like warfare underground. The avengers were among the gorse and heather, and the remainder of the pirates were doomed. . . .

"Come on," I shouted to Connie, realizing that there

was literally not a moment to lose, and, alarmed by the excitement in my voice, they started to run.

When they had come up to me, and I started to run with them towards the ship, there was a sudden thunderous report. Looking to the right, I saw that Thumbwood had taken cover, and was lying on his stomach behind the barrier. The open door was but a dim oblong of yellow light at that distance, and I could not see a yard down the passage in the rocks.

Thumbwood fired again, and the echoing roar had not died away when something went by my ear with a vicious *zipp,* and I heard the splash of a bullet upon the granite.

The pirates were coming down in force, and, finding themselves between Scylla and Charybdis, had turned at bay.

I knew Thumbwood would keep them where they were for a minute or two, and I raced to the ship with Connie at my side. Wilson had fainted, and we had to drag her between us.

Half-way up the light, steep accommodation ladder Danjuro was waiting, perfectly calm and unconcerned. We handed up the unconscious maid, and he disappeared with her in a second. Then Connie was helped up the ladder, while the whole cavern began to thunder with a fusillade of rapid firing.

"The police and coastguards are surrounding the house," I shouted, "and the rest of the crew have come

down, and are trying to fight their way into the cave."

"It is what I thought, Sir John. Those gentlemen must be considerably surprised at their reception! We can shoot them all down before they get out of the passage. Perhaps, now that rescue is at hand, we had better wait and do so?"

His eyes were glistening; I saw the light of slaughter in them. For an instant I hesitated. What he said was sane enough. The risk was comparatively small; it would only be postponing the triumphal flight.

Then I took a decision—it rested with me, and I was alone responsible. "We mustn't shoot them all down," I shouted through the din, for bullets were streaming into the cave behind as though they were pumped from a hose. "Some of them must be brought to justice. We had better be off and leave the coast-guards and police to deal with them."

Thus I spoke. I said what I honestly thought was best at the moment, though perhaps my mind was a little influenced by the natural and terrible anxiety to get my girl away from further horrors.

At any rate, I decided, and all my life long I shall never cease to regret it.

"Very good," said Danjuro. "Up into the pilot's cabin, quick, Sir John. You are indispensable there. Prepare for an instant start. I will run and fetch Thumbwood. We shall have to fire thirty or forty rounds quickly into the passage to keep them back.

Of course, they are firing automatic pistols round the bend now, and not exposing themselves any more. After we have fired we shall run for the ship. You will hear me shout and then start like lightning!"

He slipped past me, and, crouching almost to the ground, ran back towards Thumbwood like some great cat.

I flung myself aboard. Constance was attending to Wilson in the main cabin. Gascoigne was lying bound where he had been thrown, but his eyes were blazing with excitement.

I put a stop to that at once. "The remainder of your friends are being shot down," I said curtly. "Lucky for you to be here."

All the animation died out of his face. And, as I didn't want to leave him alone with Connie—it seemed a desecration that he should be in the same place with her even for a moment—I whipped out my knife, cut the bonds at his feet, and pushed him into the pilot's cabin, making him lie upon the floor at my side as I got into the swivel chair. I could shoot him dead in an instant if he moved.

Then I sat rigid, with my hand upon the switch which started the engines.

In reality, I know now that the time of waiting was very short, but it seemed an eternity to me. For the first time my nerves felt upon the point of giving way. My hand trembled. I began to think of the narrow

S-shaped passage beween high walls of rock to the sea, and realized the appalling nature of the task before me. A mere touch of the planes upon those iron barriers, and all the long struggle would prove unavailing, the triumph turn to a defeat in which my girl and I, the superman Danjuro, and faithful Thumbwood would lose our hard-won lives.

One touch and the ship would crumple up like paper and fall like a stone into the cruel cauldron of jagged rock and furious waves far below.

There came a voice from the floor. Had the prisoner divined something of my thoughts?

". . . Look here, Sir John, you're up against a nasty job. It's the very devil getting out of here if you don't know the way and haven't practised it."

Something in the young fellow's voice told me that this was not mockery. He was, moreover, the second pilot of the Pirate Ship, trained by Helzephron himself.

"I did not ask you to speak," I answered.

"No, but really it's no end of a stunt. The controls are ten times as sensitive as in an ordinary machine. If you were the best pilot living, you'd find it hard to manage in a ship that's quite new to you, and has all sorts of habits and tricks that no other has."

He spoke truly enough, and I knew it, but it was none the less unpleasant to hear.

"I suppose you're afraid for your damned skin," I sneered.

"Oh, come, draw it mild," he replied. "I only spoke to try and help you. I know when I'm beaten, and I don't bear any malice."

"If I do take you safely out, it will only mean the gallows."

"Oh, no, it won't!" he said. "I shall turn King's evidence. There are lots of things I know that no one else except Vargus knows now. I shall get let off with fifteen years. Bet you a fiver, if you like. It's to my interest to help you out."

I can generally tell when a man is sincere, and I realized that this young scoundrel was, despite—and perhaps because of—the baseness of his motive.

"Help me?"

"Yes, out of the passage. Once you get in clear air you'll fly her easily enough—and you'll be astonished, by Jove! But you'd better let me pilot you. It's the lift and the sharp right bank that are so difficult. . . ."

"Get up," I said.

He scrambled to his feet.

"Stand there!" He leaned against the wall at my side, his hands tied behind him and his arms tightly bound.

He was about to speak, when suddenly we both started. Something had happened. For a moment I did not realize what it was. Then I knew. The con-

tinuous thunder of rifle fire had stopped. Everything was dead silent. I'd hardly become conscious of the fact when there was a loud shout.

"Let her go, Sir John! Let her go!"

Danjuro stumbled into the cabin, panting like a whippet.

I pulled over the switch and then the lever of the starting mechanism.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GOLDEN DREAM

THE strangely-shaped propellers bit the air at once, the walls of the cavern, flooded with spectral light, slid backwards, and as the ship swerved round the curve towards the entrance, the day leapt at us.

Wow! but it was touch and go during the next ten seconds. If it had not been for Gascoigne I am sure that I should never have gone through. The great ship shot out of its lair like a dart; a touch upon the little steering-wheel and she was banking in the terrible right-hand turn; the granite walls seemed rushing to meet and crush her, and only the quick, steady words of command from the prisoner, which like an automaton I obeyed, got her finally into the straight. . . .

And then—oh, then—I opened out the marvelous engines; she seemed to shake herself for an instant like a bird poised for a long flight, and, humming like a wasp, she shot up and out to sea. . . .

The needle upon the speed indicator quivered round its dial, moving ever upwards. Eighty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty—and thirty more—we were doing nearly two hundred miles an hour, straight out over the Atlantic before I had a thought of our destination, or of anything but the supreme glory of that rush up the dawn wind.

The whole morning world was blue and gold, new-built and beautiful. Far below, the Mother of Oceans lay in an unwrinkled sheet of sapphire, "as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire." A tiny purple cloud upon the horizon was the Isles of Scilly, sleeping under the sun.

Connie stole in and stood by my side, her hand upon my shoulder, and I knew that her heart also was full to overflowing, as memory flared up and down in us like the flame of a lamp in a draught. It was a moment so exquisite, so full of gratitude to God, that no words of mine can do more than hint at it. For we had escaped from hell and the snare of devils, and knew it in one lightning flash of gratitude and joy.

As she stared out at the sea and sky, which glowed like the pavements of the New Jerusalem, Connie quoted some words from Milton—the song of the released spirit in his epilogue of "Comus":

> "To the Ocean now I fly,
> And those happy climes which lie
> Where Day never shuts his eye
> Up in the broad fields of the sky."

And then, as I glanced at the compass card and made a great sweep round, so that we faced the jagged coasts of Cornwall once again, she whispered, with a proud note in her voice:

"For still the Lord is Lord of Might
In deeds, in deeds, he takes delight."

Then, with a tiny pressure of my arm, she went back to the other cabin.

I had not noticed Danjuro for the last few minutes. He had led Gascoigne behind me as soon as we had made the passage. Now he reappeared.

"Danjuro!" I cried, "this ship is wonderful beyond all imagining! There isn't her equal in the whole world. She'll revolutionize flying. It's a perfect joy to pilot her!"

Danjuro nodded calmly; he was not given to enthusiasms, this man with a panther in his soul. "I have been speaking with the prisoner," he said.

"With Vargus?"

"No, though I have been to look at him, and he is quite safe. With Gascoigne, and he has suggested something that has not occurred to either of us, Sir John."

"His help will all tell in his favor when it comes to the trial. What is it now?"

"Something eminently sensible and pressing! As you see, this ship is quite unmistakable. Any pilot

would recognize her from the descriptions which have been circulated. We are now approaching the coast again and about to fly to Plymouth. The air must be full of armed patrol ships, and, whatever our speed, if we escape being shot down *en route,* we should certainly be blown to pieces on approaching the sea-drome!"

I flushed up. I had been an incredible ass never to have thought of that before. It was only too true. Nobody could possibly know that we had captured the Pirate Ship. . . .

I reduced our speed to half of what it had been. "What are we to do?" I said.

"There is a complete wireless installation on board the ship. Can you operate it, Sir John?"

"No. Even if I could leave the controls, that would be impossible. I know nothing about it, unfortunately."

"Nor I, Sir John. It is a gap in my knowledge that I propose to remedy shortly. But this Gascoigne is an operator, and offers to send any message."

"I suppose we can trust him? He certainly saved us from disaster coming out of the cavern."

I shuddered; I did not want to think of that blood-stained hole of horror any more.

"Yes, I think he can be trusted. He has everything to gain, and can do no harm that I can see. I cannot operate the keys of the apparatus, but I know the

Morse code, and if I stand by him I can check each letter as he sends it out."

Then I had an inspiration too. "Good! And now I think I can make it quite sure. I can remember the private code of the Air Police with hardly a gap. We will call up Plymouth, and all the police boats now flying, in that private code. Meanwhile, we had better run out to sea again while you are taking it down."

Again I turned the ship, and as we spiraled up and out again, I formed the message in my mind and translated it, word for word, into the letters of the code, which Danjuro took down in pencil upon a sheet of his pocket-book.

When I had finished, and as the message was necessarily rather a long one it took some time, Danjuro marched Gascoigne away to the rear cabin, where Vargus was lying. It was there, you may remember, that the wireless apparatus was installed.

We were now reaching a great height, far above any of the regular air-lanes, and I felt quite secure from any attack. Land, sea, every reminder of the world below, had vanished utterly. With hardly a sound from the magic engines we floated in a haze of gold chrysophrase. It was like a happy dream, though never was dream so beautiful.

Connie stole in again. "I thought I would leave Thumbwood and Wilson alone," she said. "They have been sitting side by side and whispering to each

other ever since we started. Neither of them seems to have the least curiosity as to where we are or where we're going."

"How thoughtful of you, dearest! Was that the only reason you came in here?"

The rest of the conversation is not a part of this story. It lasted a long time as we droned round great five-mile circles of the upper air. And then a telephone rang at my ear.

Danjuro was speaking. The message had been received at Plymouth, and an answer had been coming through for the last ten minutes. He was writing it down, letter by letter, from Gascoigne's dictation. Shortly afterwards he brought it in to me, and as I read it off the world closed round me again and fairyland vanished.

Triumph filled my veins and reddened my blood. The message came from Muir Lockhart, who was at Plymouth again, and was one shout of wonder and congratulation. "The whole world will thank you," it concluded.

For a little time I was intoxicated by that message. I saw myself a hero, vindicated a thousand times in the eyes of all men, the Chief of Air Police whose name would be historical. I think there are few men of my age who would not have had their moment of vainglory; we are made so. But as I read the message to the man who had brought it, I realized that I had

done nothing, after all, and that everything was due to his marvelous brilliancy and courage.

Thank Heaven that I realized it without a pang of envy, and I told him what I thought of him in no unstinted way.

He heard me to the end with no change of countenance. When I had done, he said: "You have been very kind, Sir John, and I greatly appreciate what you have said. If, indeed, you are indebted to me in any way for the help I have been able to give, you can repay me, if you will."

"To the half of my kingdom!" I said, with a laugh, though I was in dead earnest all the same.

"That is a promise, Sir John?" He looked down at me with magnetic eyes.

"A promise, Danjuro."

"Then, while I live, I ask you to say nothing whatever of my part in this affair. I wish it kept as secret as possible; some little part must leak out; there will be investigations, public trials, and so forth. But much can be kept secret, and it rests with you and Thumbwood. And as I have your promise, my mind is at rest."

"But this is madness, Danjuro! You are owed the thanks of two continents. You . . ."

He interrupted me.

"I want nothing of the sort. I have had your thanks, and that is sufficient. The work itself is

enough. My usefulness to Mr. Van Adams, the endeavor of my whole life, would be destroyed if anything were known."

Reluctantly I promised. "But Mr. Van Adams, I shall tell *him* everything!" I said.

Danjuro bowed his head. A faint flush came into his yellow face. "If you think I have done anything worth it," he replied, with a curious and touching silence.

And this was the man with the panther in his soul! For the American millionaire he had supreme love, with devotion—worship—and for no one and nothing else on earth above or below it.

A man with a single obsession, a man of one idea. Well, most of the great men in life have been that. . . .

I steered for Plymouth at full speed, coming down to three thousand feet. In a flash the jagged coast, fringed with a thin line of white, came clear to view. We sped from the Atlantic, over the narrow peninsula of land which divides it from the Channel, and then turned east. The Bay, with St. Michael's Mount looking like a tiny white pebble, gave place to the long, menacing snout of the Lizard, and, as a few minutes later we neared Falmouth, a flight of airships rose from the water of that mighty harbor and came up to join us like a flock of gulls, the big Klaxon electric horns blaring a welcome. Dead Man's Rock and Gall Island, Looe, Mevagissey, Fowey—all slipped away

astern, and the bluff outlines of Rame Head, from which the Devon watchers first signaled the Armada, came rushing into view. I had been speeding far ahead, turning back, flying all round the escorting patrol boats, which were doing all they knew, letting them see what a wonder had come into our hands, and rejoicing more and more in the powers of the ship, as I found them one by one. Now I slowed down, and signaled by horn to the leading vessel of the flotilla.

As we turned and entered Plymouth Sound, the others spread themselves out in a great wedge, of which I was leader, like a skein of wild geese upon the wing. A salute of guns boomed out as we flew high on the Breakwater, and all the bells of Plymouth were ringing as I swooped down into the sea-drome.

And all this time, for three-quarters of an hour or more, our two prisoners had been alone together in the aft cabin, where the tools and spare parts were stored. Neither I nor Danjuro had given them a further thought, and it was the one fatal mistake we made upon that morning of triumph.

Thumbwood had, however, been in to look at them once or twice, and had seen nothing disturbing. Certainly, when some of my men came to take them to the station, they were lying sullen in their bonds, and not saying a word to each other of any kind.

But by that time the mischief was doubtless done.

. . . . . .

Space begins to press upon me. There are still two strange and unforgetable scenes to add to this narrative, further tragedies to set down. The last scene of all, which I have called "The Epilogue," was not written for a year after the earlier part of this story, which is now published as a whole for the first time. Why this is so will become clear as you read on, if you care to follow me to the very end.

But as I would not weary you, I will only indicate the happenings during the rest of that day at Plymouth in the briefest possible fashion. I am impatient to bring the story up to the hour of eleven-thirty of the same night.

Immediately we were at rest on the placid waters of the sea-drome, Muir Lockhart, with a strong force of Air Police, came aboard. Constance and her maid were taken in a motor-boat to one of my patrol ships, which started with them for the Hounslow Aerodrome within half an hour of our arrival. We both of us thought it best that she should proceed to London immediately, and going by air in a Government ship, she would escape all annoyance and publicity.

All approach to the sea-drome was barred, and though the Hoe was crowded with spectators, none of them could approach anywhere near to us. When I had given Lockhart an outline of what had occurred, the two prisoners were taken over the pool with a strong guard, and run up in the private lift to the

A.P. station, where there was a strong cell ready to receive them. Then I was free to show my colleague, himself an expert airman, the wonders of our capture.

I was doing this—we were in the pilot's cabin—when one of my men came in and said that a motor-launch had come alongside from the private air-yacht *May Flower,* which was moored not a hundred yards away. I had noticed, when descending, that a magnificent yacht was close by, but I did not identify it as Mr. Van Adams' ship. It appeared that he had been sleeping aboard for the last two or three nights, since he had flown down from London for the funeral, and was now alongside.

Van Adams, of course, was an exception to all ordinary rules, and in a minute he was shaking hands in the private saloon and betraying a most lively curiosity as to our adventures. I put Danjuro to satisfy him, and when we had discussed a bottle of Helzephron's champagne, I left a couple of trusted men to guard the ship, and went ashore. Danjuro returned to the *May Flower* with his patron.

The rest of the day was a whirl of business and excitement, though I managed to get three hours much needed sleep in the afternoon.

Wires from the Government, from America, from Royalty, poured in, in a never-ceasing stream. There were innumerable officials to see, the correspondents of the great newspapers to satisfy with some sort of

story—a hundred things to do and arrange for. The whole of England was in a ferment, and the stone building of the Air Police on the Hoe was, for a few hours, the center of it all. The air was thick with patrol ships, warning off aviators of all kinds from approaching the Pirate Ship, which lay at rest and harmless by the north wall of the pool.

Just before I retired to rest the news of what was called "The Battle of the Moor" began to come through. The pirates, seeing their ship gone, had rushed up again into the house, and had held it with the courage of desperation. Only three of them had survived, and were now locked up in the police-station at Penzance.

. . . It would take many pages to detail the events of that crowded day, which did not end for me until ten o'clock at night, for I was forced to attend a congratulatory dinner at the "Royal." Previous to that I had found it necessary to summon Danjuro from the *May Flower,* where he had remained quietly with Mr. Van Adams during the day. It was necessary that I should be restored to something like my former self, and only Danjuro could make me blond again! My mustache, alas! he could not restore.

I had arranged to sleep at the station, where there were several bedrooms, and about ten-thirty I passed the sentry and entered the grounds.

Plymouth was now quiet. It was a hot, dark night,

with neither moon nor stars. During the day the weather had changed, and now thunder muttered far away at sea and amethyst sheet-lightning flickered upon the horizon.

Now and again a drop of hot rain fell.

CHAPTER XIX

LAST FLIGHT OF THE PIRATE AIRSHIP

THE station superintendent met me in the office, which was brilliantly lit and cooled by an electric fan.

"I expect you're feeling pretty well done, Sir John," he said.

"I feel pretty tired, Johnson, I own."

"There's a big thunderstorm coming up, not a doubt of it. The air'll be cooler afterwards. All the arrangements about the prisoners are made, sir."

The staff had been in communication with London all day upon this matter, but I had not heard the result. I inquired from the superintendent now.

"Our two birds, Sir John, and the three they've got at Penzance are to travel to London to-night. They'll be brought up at Bow Street for a minute or two, and remanded for a week to suit your convenience. The Home Office will communicate with you, sir."

"Very well. How are they going?"

"The night mail train leaves Penzance at twelve, and gets here at two. The other three will be on board

and well guarded. Our prisoners will join the train at Mill Bay Station. I've detailed Prosser and Moore to escort them."

"See that the men are well armed. How are the prisoners?"

"Very quiet, sir. They seem to realize that it's all up with them. They've taken their food all right."

"They are both together?"

"Yes, Sir John. You see, we've only the one cell that is absolutely safe. But that can't make any difference. A man looks in every half-hour. They can't hear him coming, and he reports that they don't even talk."

"They're not handcuffed?"

"No, I didn't think it necessary, sir. They will be, and chained together, too, when they leave for the train. We searched them thoroughly, and took everything they had on them away half an hour after they were brought in. Would you like to see them, sir?"

"I don't think so, Johnson. I've been a good deal too much in their society during the last day or two. I don't want to look at that Vargus again until he's in the dock, and I'm giving evidence against him."

"He's a wicked-looking customer, if ever I saw one," said the inspector, with a face of disgust. "Well, good-night, sir, and I hope you'll sleep well. I've told the station attendant to have your bath ready at eight. He'll call you then."

The good Johnson went away, and I was left alone. My head ached, and I felt disinclined for sleep at once. I undressed, however, and sat in pyjamas as I smoked a final pipe. There was whisky, soda and a bowl of ice, and I took a peg. I felt singularly low and dispirited. It was, I supposed, the inevitable reaction of the nerves after all I had endured, combined with the heavy pressure of the atmosphere and the electric tension of the storm. At any rate, I remember feeling—as everyone does at times—that the greatest triumphs and successes were worth very little, after all, when once they were achieved. There is bitterness at the bottom of every cup—*surgit amari aliquid*—and life was a poor thing at best. And I fell to reflecting on the evil and misery that can be wrought by one man.

The gaunt specter of Hawk Helzephron haunted my mind, and the long row of dead men that must be laid to his account, the brave fellows of my own service, the Transatlantic people—to say nothing of the black scoundrels that he had made and tempted, who had been hurried into eternity with their crimes unrepented. . . .

It was a morbid train of thought, but I was worn out, and the dark hour had its way with me, until I thought of Connie and her merciful preservation from harm, my own rescue. Then, rather ashamed of myself, I made an effort to banish these gloomy imaginings, said my prayers, and got into bed.

All the same, as I fell asleep, the stammer of the approaching thunder and the white glare of lightning, which now and then flashed into the darkened room, seemed like the growling of those awful dogs and the glare of the advancing airship in the cave. . . .

I think now that I must have had some unconscious premonition of the tragedy which was racing towards me all the time.

. . . I was awakened sharply and suddenly, at first I thought by a flash of lightning. But it was not so. The electrics had been suddenly turned on, and there were men in uniform round my bed. The wind had risen and was whistling outside. A deluge of thunder rain was in progress, and great sheets of water were flung against the window.

I saw Superintendent Johnson. His face was white as linen.

"What is it?" I shouted.

He shouted in answer, and I heard his voice above the tumult of the storm.

"The prisoners, Sir John," he wailed. "They've got away. They picked the lock of the cell somehow, got into the passage, and broke the bars of the window at the end. We none of us heard a sound!"

I leapt out of bed and began to bellow orders for pursuit—until I saw Johnson's terrified face again, and knew that I had not heard all.

". . . They got down to the water somehow, sir.

They must have climbed down the lift rails. *And they swam to the ship. . . .*"

"Good God! *What* ship?"

"Their own ship, Sir John. Somehow or other they managed to get on board; we've just heard. . . ."

"Where are they?"

"They did for the two men on board, and must have managed to start the engines—*the ship's gone.* The searchlights are all over the pool, and there's no trace of her. They were seen, Sir John, I . . ."

He broke off short, the words drying up in his mouth. All the other men shrank together in a frightened group as Danjuro came slowly into the room.

I have never seen a figure so awe-inspiring, or terrible.

In moments of supreme emotion a European grows chalk-white, an Asiatic gray.

The Japanese was livid gray now, and his face seemed carved with fantastic gashes—gray rubber slashed with a knife. He was like a man who had slept a thousand years and wakened to find himself old, and in hell.

He came slowly up to me, moving like a thing on wheels drawn by a cord, and when he was close, he spoke.

I can never recall his voice without an almost physical state of fear. Suppose that you could go with Dante to that gate over which is written, *"Abandon*

hope all ye who enter here." And suppose, as you stood there and listened, you heard a well-known voice far down, saying, "I am tormented in this flame. . . ."

Well, Danjuro's voice was like that.

"During a lull in the storm," he said, as if repeating a lesson, "I went up on the deck of the *May Flower* for a breath of air. Mr. Van Adams accompanied me. We were looking over the water to the Pirate Ship, when I saw lights flashing up and down through the portholes of the fuselage. It struck me as strange. We wondered what the two men in charge could be doing. As we watched, we were just able to distinguish two men coming up on deck. Then there came a vivid flash of lightning, and I saw everything plainly. The two men were Vargus and Gascoigne, and they were carrying the body of a man in uniform, which they lowered into the water."

Inspector Johnson gave a quick gasp. Danjuro continued:

"Without a moment's delay I got a couple of pistols, and Mr. Van Adams and I jumped into the electric launch, which was moored alongside the *May Flower,* though on the other side to that which faced the Pirate. There was no time to summon help. We shot out into the pool just as the storm began again with thunderclaps and a deluge of water. We were within a few yards of the ship and making ready to board her, when Mr. Van Adams flashed a powerful electric torch, and

I saw Vargus with a knife in his hand hacking at the mooring ropes. At the same time I noticed that the lights in the pilot's cabin had been turned on.

"I took a snap-shot at Vargus and missed him. Almost simultaneously he fired directly at the light of the torch which Mr. Van Adams held. The bullet went through Mr. Van Adams' heart, and he fell back dead in my arms—I was steering the launch. I fired off all the cartridges in my pistol, but the thunder drowned the noise. The Pirate Ship began to move. I saw the lights in her side moving along—and then she lifted and disappeared."

The awful voice ceased, and all of us in that room stood like waxen figures in a show.

. . . . . .

For three days the Press and public were kept in entire ignorance of what had happened during the storm.

Upon the fourth, just as I was beginning to think that all my measures were in vain and that the Pirate Ship had vanished utterly, the Head Office in Whitehall received two long telegrams from the Prefect of Finistère in France and the Chief of Police of Quimper, the old cathedral city in Brittany.

On one of the wild and lonely Breton moors a goatherd had discovered the wreckage of a large airship. By it was the body of a young man, but only one body. The telegrams urgently asked me to come over at once.

I did so, in my fastest patrol boat. Lying in a wild wilderness of gorse and heather were the remains of the Pirate Ship. It had been destroyed beyond possibility of reconstruction, and destroyed methodically and deliberately while at rest upon the ground. There was no doubt about that. The body I afterwards saw in the Morgue at Quimper was that of Gascoigne. He had not met his death by any accidental means, but had been stabbed in the back.

He must have been dead for quite two days before the goat-herd made his discovery, and of Vargus, living or dead, there was not a trace.

I was back in London again that night, and just as I was going to bed in Half Moon Street the bell of the flat rang. Thumbwood went to the door and announced that Mr. Danjuro wished to see me.

He was in evening dress, and quite his old self again to outward appearances, except that his black hair had turned an iron gray.

For a moment or two we discussed details of the inquest that had been held *in camera* upon poor Van Adams, arrangements made for the trial of the three surviving pirates, and so on. Then I told him what I had seen at Quimper.

"Mr. Muir Lockhart told me of the telegrams from France," he said. "I called at Whitehall, but you had already started for Quimper, Sir John. I must apolo-

gize for such a late call, but I was anxious to hear your news. Now I see my way clear."

"I suppose, after your great loss, you will go back to America, or perhaps Japan, and settle down?"

He shook his head.

"You know," I continued, "that if you cared for it, there is a highly-paid and important position open to you with the Air Police? Nothing would give me greater pleasure, as you know, than to have you as a colleague."

"I thank you, Sir John, but I have other work to do. I am a rich man, but that only interests me, inasmuch as it is a means to an end. When that end is reached . . ."

He made a curious gesture with his arm, which I did not understand.

"May I ask what your work is?"

He looked at me with surprise.

"Vargus is still alive," he said simply.

"He will be caught soon. The police of the world are looking for him, if he *is* alive."

"I think it will be a long pursuit, Sir John. He has got off with the treasure, and I know one or two things about him which are not generally known. I do not think that Mr. Vargus will fall into the hands of the police."

"Then you . . . ?"

"It is my work. I owe the spirit of my patron this

man's blood, and I shall pay the debt. Were he to hide in the depths of the sea, sooner or later I shall find him. There is no power strong enough in life to keep us two apart."

He had dropped his voice. The words hissed like a knife upon a strop.

"I wish you good luck," I said at length, and was about to say more, to express my gratitude again, when he cut me short.

"I am leaving for Paris in half an hour," he said, "and must bid you farewell, Sir John. Convey my humble compliments to Miss Shepherd," and with a low bow and a frigid handshake he was gone.

Six weeks afterwards, on the day before my wedding, I received a magnificent Japanese vase of the old Satsuma enamel, but the card enclosed bore no address.

I did not see this extraordinary being again for nearly two years. Of that meeting I shall write in the following short epilogue.

EPILOGUE

IN the winter of 19— I was at Monte Carlo for three weeks, taking a short holiday alone, and also looking out for a villa at Roquebrune or Mentone for my wife, who was to come out with the baby as soon as the house had been secured.

Now and again I went into the "Rooms" and staked a louis or two upon an even chance or a *transversale* at roulette; but, speaking generally, the Casino bored me. The cosmopolitan crowd of smart people—like champagne corks floating on a cesspool—the professional gamblers, with their veil of decorous indifference concealing a fierce greed for money which they have not earned—a sprinkling of wood-ash over a glowing fire—presented little interest, and I much preferred long walks and drives in the earthly paradise of Les Alpes Maritimes.

I stayed at the Métropole Hotel, making it the base of my excursions, and one evening, after dinner, I paid one of my rare visits to the Casino. I wandered about the gilded, stuffy saloons, with their illuminations of oil-lamps—so that no enterprising gentleman may cut

the electric wires and make off with the money on the tables!—the low voices and almost sanctimonious manner of the players, the over-dressed demi-mondaines who glide about with their hard, evil eyes. The place was very full. All the chairs round the roulette tables were occupied, and people were standing behind the chairs as well. As I am tall, I was able to reach over and place my stakes, and I did so several times. When I had lost four louis with monotonous regularity, I decided that it was not worth while, and thought I would go and smoke, for, contrary to the usual pictures in the magazines, smoking is *not* allowed in the roulette or trente-et-quarante rooms.

So I went out into the Atrium, the great pillared entrance hall, which looks like an important provincial corn exchange, and lit a cigarette. The place was fairly full of people, walking up and down, or reading the latest telegrams, which are fixed up upon a green-baize screen, and I was watching them idly when, coming round the corner from the cloak-room, I saw —Danjuro!

My heart gave a sudden leap, the sight of him was so utterly unexpected and recalled so much. To tell the truth, he seemed to belong to a long past and forgotten dream, for Connie and I, by mutual consent, hardly ever spoke of the days of the pirates.

Danjuro was about fifteen yards away. I saw his face distinctly, and was certain that I was not mis-

taken. Then he looked up, and I could swear that he saw and recognized me.

Be that as it may, he turned and slipped round the corner like a weasel, and when I got there he had vanished. I made a search, of course, though I knew how futile it would be if he wished to avoid me, and the result was as I expected. There wasn't a trace of him anywhere, and none of the attendants or door-keepers had seen a Japanese gentleman anywhere.

I went for a walk on the terrace in the moonlight, and then returned to the hotel and sought my bed. For a long time I could not sleep. The sight of Danjuro had made me restless. A legion of memories trooped through the brain, and curiosity marshaled the procession. What was that enigmatic and sinister being doing here? Was he still upon his ruthless quest, moving through the panorama of European life like some wandering Jew of vengeance? Nothing had ever been heard of Vargus again. For my part, I shared the opinion of the police bureaux of the Continent, that the soft-voiced and malignant scoundrel was dead.

It was pathetic to think of Danjuro prowling through life to avenge his patron, wasting his magnificent powers upon a hopeless quest. Pathetic, yes —so ran my thoughts—but one can't think of Danjuro as an ordinary human being. He was simply a single idea, clothed in flesh, a marvelous machine designed

for one operation only, a specialist so perfect that he became a monomaniac.

Poor Van Adams, to protect and serve him had been Danjuro's whole life. Every faculty of mind and body had been devoted to that one end. And yet he must have loved the American to have served him so? And if he could love he was human!

I wrestled with the problem till dawn, and got no nearer a solution. I knew that, despite our companionship in peril and the extraordinary adventures we had gone through together, if Van Adams had lived and for any reason had told Danjuro to put me out of the way, the little man would have executed the job with neatness, dispatch, and an entire absence of compunction.

I decided that Danjuro, as a subject of psychological analysis, was quite beyond me, and did my best to forget the incident. With an effort I managed to do so, and got a few hours' sleep before Thumbwood called me. I said nothing to him of having seen Danjuro, for he also is unwilling to talk much of the days of terror—perhaps because his wife, Wilson, that was, and is still, Connie's handmaid—so strenuously objects to it.

About half-past eleven I left the hotel and strolled to the foot of the funicular railway which hauls one up from the narrow ledge of land on which Monte Carlo stands to the heights of La Turbie. I designed

to lunch at the excellent hotel at the top in the clear mountain air, and then to walk along the Upper Corniche towards Roquebrune, Eze, and the mountains above Mentone. There is much to explore in these high regions—ruins of Roman and medieval forts, built as a defense against the raiding Moors of the Mediterranean, and here and there delightful villas among pine-woods and olive groves, far from the haunts of men.

It was a house of this description, a mountain hermitage, that I wished to find and take for six months. I knew that they were occasionally to be let, but somewhat difficult to come across upon the books of the agents. In Monte Carlo I had been assured that personal exploration was the best and quickest way.

I lunched at La Turbie on a magnificent *bouillabaisse* and *riz-de-veau,* and after an interval set out upon my walk. It was a magnificent afternoon, the air golden clear. Far away out to sea Corsica lay like a dim cloud. The mountain side fell in terrace after terrace of olives to groups of painted houses looking like toys. Away to the right were the red roofs and gleaming white buildings of the Monte Carlo palaces, and the promontory of the Tête du Chien was perfectly outlined in the azure of the sea.

"Yes," I thought, "upon this great height is the place to live when one comes to the Côte d'Azur, and I won't go home to-night until I have found some-

thing. . . ." And I began to climb by a by-path.

The afternoon was hot. After a mile or two I rested in the shade of a great rock and fell asleep. When I awoke the sun, which sets early in winter, even on the Riviera, was declining. I was not quite sure of my direction, but thought that I could make Roquebrune by an oblique path over the spur of the mountain, and from there easily descend to Cap Martin and get a carriage, and take the tram which crawls along the cliff to Monte Carlo. So I set out.

The path, however, did not prove to be the right one, and it was twilight, or that extremely short interval which does duty for it in the south, before I came to three or four stone huts fronting a plateau with an enclosure full of goats. I explained my predicament to a swarthy woman who sat knitting at a door, and she gave me directions. She also said, in mingled French and Italian, for the frontier was not five miles away, that there would be a small empty villa to be let a mile onwards—at least, she believed so.

"Can you tell me the name of the owner, madame?" I asked.

"But, no, m'sieu. It is a new gentleman. He has bought the villa and the larger one, which is close to it but higher up the hill. He is a scholar of some sort, and lives quite alone, so he cannot want the smaller house on the road. It was, moreover, always let in the time of the last owner, M. Visguis, of Nice."

I thanked the good dame, refused a cup of goats' milk, gave her a five-franc piece and started on my way again rejoicing. My luck was in. This mountain châlet would be just the thing, and I made up my mind to interview the recluse on my way home.

The sun sank, and night came up with a rush out of the Mediterranean. Everything was dead still. There are no birds in these solitudes, and the hum of day insects was over. Although the moon rose almost at once and gave sufficient light to steer by, the place was eerie. Immense rocks threw ashen shadows. The stone pines stood like silent sentinels, and the huge coronet of jewels—topaz against black velvet—that was Monte Carlo seemed a hundred miles away.

Following my directions, I came at length to the garden wall of a fairly large villa, painted all along the sides, with gigantic and melancholy trees, and the moonlight shed a ghostly radiance upon it. This, I knew, was the house in occupation. The one that might be let was lower down the slope and on the other side of the road—to my right. I could just see the roof of it as I peered over the parapet.

Pushing open a wooden gate, I went up the garden path towards the Villa Turquoise—that I had discovered was its name. Tree frogs were croaking round the house, but as it was winter, there were no friendly fireflies; once or twice the fans of a palm clicked with a dry, rustling noise.

It was difficult to find the door as I came up to the villa, but after a moment, I saw a broad band of yellow light coming from the side, and turned towards it. I walked upon the turf of a little lawn, and threaded my way between orange and pepper trees, with here and there a bush of Cape gooseberries.

And up to that moment I never had a suspicion or a qualm. Indeed, I felt at peace with myself and all the world, washed and purified by the sweet Alpine air and all the loveliness my eyes had looked upon that day. Then I heard, clear, strong and sudden, a chord of music on a piano.

I stopped dead still.

Again that crash of sound, and then a smooth and mellow arpeggio, as masterly fingers ran up and down the keys of a magnificent instrument.

I grew cold, suddenly and horribly cold.

I could see nothing but a long French window glowing orange with light in the dark side of the house. I had heard nothing but some chords upon a grand piano.

But in that moment, though subconsciously, I *knew*.

I moved forward in little automatic jerks, listening with a dreadful fear, a sick certainty. The second before I came to the window and looked inside, it began.

Played by a master hand, I heard the opening notes of the Third Ballade of Chopin. . . .

Another step, and, in the darkness myself, I could see into the room.

The musician was Mr. Vargus.

He had grown a little mustache, which was waxed at the ends, and a small black imperial on his chin. He was also much fatter than when I had seen him last, and he wore a smoking jacket of purple velvet. On one finger was a diamond ring, which flashed in the lamplight as the firm, powerful hands rose and fell.

There was a soft smile in the sly eyes as he interpreted the beautiful, fantastic music.

I am going to tell you what happened without comment or any reference whatever to my own feelings.

The melody progressed to that marvelous passage which Beardsley saw in line as a white horse ambling through a dark wood of pines, ridden by a lady in a dress of black velvet.

At the opening chords of the theme a door behind the player opened quietly. He heard nothing.

An awful and august figure entered.

It was Danjuro, but not the Danjuro I had ever known.

He wore a robe of yellow silk with wide kimono sleeves, and a sash of purple round his waist. Into the sash was thrust the long scabbard of an ancient Japanese sword—a scabbard of tortoise-shell and silver. His hair was differently arranged, his lips compressed into a single line. The eyes, which seemed

curiously elongated, glittered like black lacquer in a high light.

He crept forward and touched Vargus on the shoulder.

The man in the velvet coat leapt up with a short, sharp cry. Then he whipped round and came face to face with Danjuro.

They remained, staring into each other's eyes for several seconds.

I saw a ghostly change beginning in the pirate's face. Inch by inch something crept over it like a veil as life ebbed away. Then he fell in a crumpled heap upon the carpet.

The Japanese looked down at him without a change in his dreadful stony glare. Then he bent down and pulled the limp form out straight, turning it with its face downwards. He drew the sword and lifted it high above his head.

As it gleamed I shut my eyes. . . .

When I looked again, sick with the sickness of death itself, the figure in the yellow robe had raised both arms above its head. The sleeves had slipped away and the coils of muscle stood out upon the brown flesh.

Danjuro's lips were parted. He seemed to be speaking rapidly to something above him. His whole face was irradiated with joy, and the sword in his right hand shone like a tall flame.

He remained there for some little time. Then he lowered his arms, and taking a square of purple silk from his breast, he cleansed the sword, and I knew what he was going to do.

He placed the jeweled hilt upon the carpet and adjusted the point at his waist, steadying the blade with his left hand. Then, with a loud cry, as if of exaltation, he fell heavily forward. . . .

He had gone to his own place in the way appointed to the Heroes of Old Japan.

THE END

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